6
Outbreak Company
THE POWER OF MOE
Ichiro Sakaki
Illustration Yuugen

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Chapter One: Do We Meet by Chance?

Looking back on it now, maybe I had a sense that something was coming.

There was a big, bright full moon that night. I was lying in bed, which was all well and good, but even when I closed my eyes I couldn't quite slip into unconsciousness. Unable to fall asleep, but not able to muster up the energy to go do something, either, I just lay there, aimlessly passing the lazy time.

This was unusual—normally I'm a pretty good sleeper.

"Hrm..."

I sighed and opened my eyes at last. I could see the familiar shapes of my room in the semi-darkness.

I didn't have any nightlight in my room, nor were there any lamps outside. When night fell around here, you were really closed in by the darkness. If there were clouds or rain at night, you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. I had grown up with plenty of good old-fashioned urban light pollution, and I was a little shocked to find out how dark a night could really be.

But that's how the world really works after sundown, after all. And it made the moon, when it was out, all the more conspicuous, bright against the canvas of night. With no air pollution, the sky was especially clear, with nothing to interrupt the cold, indifferent light from pouring down on you.

It all added up to the sense that the night was actually brighter outside than it was in my room.

"Hm...?" Suddenly, I frowned.

Despite the curtain over my window, I had the feeling something had moved outside.

Maybe an owl or a bat or something? We did have a forest adjacent to the mansion, which was supposed to be home to a number of nocturnal species. In fact, wasn't there a big tree just outside my window? Maybe one of those night-dwelling animals was in the branches somewhere.

So it was no big deal. Nothing worth worrying about. Right?

But as I lay there in the dark, I couldn't help thinking about it.

I snuck suspicious little glances toward the window—and I was sure I saw something like a shadow flicker there again.

I wasn't imagining it. And it wasn't an owl or a bat, I could tell now.

Naturally, I couldn't make out the exact size or shape of whatever was out there. But I was pretty sure the birds and the bats in this area wouldn't get any closer to our house than they had to... and they definitely wouldn't tap insistently on the glass if they did.

"What the heck...?"

I sat up in bed, feeling distinctly suspicious.

The sound came again: *tap, tap*.

Two soft taps. Then a pause, then two more.

It didn't sound like something just blowing against the glass in the wind. It was purposeful, clearly intended to get the attention of the person in the room.

That's right: someone was knocking.

"At this time of the night?" I grabbed the smartphone by my pillow to check the time. The screen said 2:30 a.m.

I would have considered the night still young at that hour back during my time as a home security guard, but since moving to this mansion, I had adopted a more proper schedule. On most nights, I would have been sound asleep by now. So, I assumed, would everyone else in the house. It was that hour of the night when, as the proverb said, even the grass and trees were asleep.

So who was out there?

As I lay there in silence, I realized my whole body was stiff with fear. My mind was replaying old television programs I'd seen about paranormal phenomena.

What if it was a ghost? *This* world was full of things that would be considered occult or fantastical or even superstitious in modern Japan. Magic and sprites were well within the realm of the everyday around here. So it was entirely possible I was dealing with a ghost.

But even so...

My more than a dozen years growing up in modern Japan had firmly cemented in my mind the idea that ghosts = scary. It was practically

instinctive. So I clung to any bit of logic that might help me deny the possibility. But still, what's scary is scary.

Meanwhile, the sound went on.

Of course, it crossed my mind to simply pull the covers up over my head, pretend to be asleep, and insist to myself that I was just imagining all of this. Unfortunately, the pervasive silence made the tapping all too obvious. It's like how once you notice the ticking of a clock, you can't take your mind off it, and then good luck falling asleep again. It becomes impossible to ignore.

I kept lying there. And lying there.

Finally, I gave in.

I got out of bed and went over to the window. My heart was pounding so loud it was distracting.

A corner of my mind was busy asking, *What am I going to do if there's some awful monster there?*

The classic Japanese ghost is a woman with half her face hidden with long, greasy black hair. Oh, but in the Western tradition there's a lot of zombies, creatures who are rotting or whose faces are melting off. When it comes to anime, I guess weird ghosts aren't as scary as a yandere with a hatchet who can't quite meet your eyes and who— No! Not the time for that!

"How stupid am I, feeding my own fears like this? What good does that do?"

The procession of terrifying images flashed through my mind, my brain jumping from one to the next even as I wished it would stop. I'd come this far, though. It would be even worse to stop now.

I screwed up my courage, standing in front of the window.

Then I grabbed the curtains with both hands—and closed my eyes.

"I'm not afraid I'm not afraid I'm not afraid I'm not afraid, Kanou Shinichi is not afraid!" I chanted like a spell. "I'm not afraid because there's no need to be scared! Be it a ghost or a faerie or a devil or a demon, if she's also a beautiful girl then she's not scary! There are plenty of moe ghost characters!"

A lot of them were even the heroines of their shows! Forcing myself to picture several such characters—*aren't those clumsy ghosts dressed as shrine maidens great?!*—I pulled aside the curtains as hard as I could and

flung open the window.

"Ghost! I see your true form—Otherworld Monster!!"

If there was really something paranormal out there, I figured I would pretty much be reduced to a tiny, frightened baby, so I shouted and struck a pose partly to encourage myself. Between me throwing the window open and the breeze gusting in, the curtains went billowing to the side.

And then it was just me staring out into the night.

I didn't even get to those famous (?) words, "Spirit Wave of Light That Shines upon Immoral Beings!" before my mouth hung open.

There, bathed in the moonlight, was a girl. For a second, I almost thought she was floating in midair, but I quickly realized my mistake. She was sitting on a tree branch, watching me.

"Evening," the girl said with a smile. Her voice was the slightest bit husky, as if she were caressing the ear of her listener with—

"Er... Hello," I said, mostly reflexively. It was about as dumb a thing as I could possibly have said at that moment, but I had completely and totally lost my nerve.

Why? Because she was perfect.

Sitting there in the moonlight, she was terrifyingly composed; there was no way past her guard. She almost looked like a doll or something that had been prepared with anything and everything in mind. The slight tremble, the grace note of hesitance that real humans, for better or for worse, always have, she completely lacked.

Her big, black eyes, fringed with long lashes, stared straight at me. Well-formed brows peeked out from behind her bangs. Then there was the straight, smooth bridge of her nose, her soft-looking, fine lips. Everything combined for an enormous impact.

"Lovely night, isn't it?" the girl said easily. The wind whistled and the leaves shook as if in agreement.

The wind picked up her hair, dark as the night itself, and tugged at the hem of her dress. She was wearing a Gothic-style dress with more frills than just about anything you would normally see. It was cinched at the waist but left the shoulders exposed, as if it existed not for the comfort of the wearer but only to make them look adorable. And on her, it worked.

There were a lot of dark colors on the outfit, but that made the abundant frills, the bare shoulders, and her white knees all the more striking—the

contrast strangely enhanced her presence.

Wait... She seems less like a ghost and more like... a vampire!

Her very assertiveness made her seem like she wasn't a ghost. Disembodied spirits seem like they hardly exist, like they might melt into the night at any moment—but this girl appeared to take the night, in fact, the moonlight itself, as a stage upon which to display her beauty.

She gave me an alluring smile, as if she could read my thoughts, and said, "The night wind shimmers in the moonlight—and it is very beautiful."

"Hey..."

At that moment, I finally realized something: I recognized her dress.

I took a fresh look at her face—or more precisely, just above her face. And just as I expected, there was a dark-purple ribbon woven into her hair.

"Suiren..."

She was dressed like the character Suiren from the anime *Rose Princess*. It's a show about dolls who battle each other, and Suiren is one of the villains, a doll who's hostile to the protagonist. But her Gothic Lolita design, which is frankly better balanced than the heroine's, ended up making her the more popular of the two characters.

Of course, in *Rose Princess*, Suiren is an antique doll, so she only comes up to about half the height of a person—whereas the girl in front of me now was full-size. Excepting that one detail, though, she looked like she could have come straight out of the anime.

"You..." she said with a giggle, the edges of her lips just turning up as she looked at the person staring moronically at her, his mouth hanging open (i.e., me).

I found it intensely seductive. I felt a shock of something akin to fear, but it wasn't unpleasant. Just the opposite. It was almost like being emotionally moved, but it wasn't quite that, either. Was this what they called being attracted to someone?

"...must be Kanou Shinichi," she said.

"Er, yeah," I answered, nodding reflexively. "How do you know my name...?"

Even as I asked, though, something else occurred to me.

Japanese. The girl was speaking Japanese. In a place where I was one of the only people who knew that language. That must mean she was—

"I am the light that guides the darkness." She placed both her hands over her chest, closing her eyes with their long lashes. "Yes: I am the chosen light, elected to be the guide to a new world."

"Um..."

Part of me wanted to joke, "That's cool, go ahead and speak Japanese"—but I didn't have it in me at that moment. I was completely enraptured by the aura she exuded.

And then...

"Kanou Shinichi-san..."

She reached a pale hand out to me, as if to say, "Here, take it."

"You have a choice. If you take my hand, it will mean that you acknowledge my existence. It shall be a bond of destiny, testament to the contract."

"The c-contract?"

"If you don't take my hand, you shall wallow in ignorance, accomplishing your reason for being while trapped in darkness. It is I who guide, but you who choose. Now—steel yourself. Once the way to Ragnarök has been opened, you will not be permitted to sit idly by."

I could only stare at the slim, white fingers and look into her beautiful

face.

Was this—you know, that thing that happens all the time in anime and manga and light novels?! Was I going to enter a contract as her servant, throwing myself into battle so that we could beat the bad guys together? Was it one of those?! Would she turn into a sword for me to use, or would she power up when I sang for her, or would we be stealing holy relics, or be gamblers laden with debt and betting with our lives so that we had to do burning prostrations, or—! Wait. I think that last thing is not like the others. Probably.

I felt my heart pounding even harder than before. I mean, we were talking about "destiny" and "chosen" and "light" and "darkness" and "contracts" and "reasons for being," and to top it all off, "Ragnarök"...! What tension was in the air! Think of the heft the word "destiny" has—we're not just talking about fate, but ***fate***! Consider the portentousness of "twilight of the gods" when you call it *Ragnarök*!! This is foundational stuff!

Ahh! A captivating unreality appears before my eyes. This girl might have leapt straight out of my computer monitor...!

Yes! This very moment is when I make my break with the tedious day-to-day!

.....

(Insert your own deadpan comment like "Is your life really boring?" or "Didn't you do that once already?")

"Me... I..."

Hesitant, quaking, I reached out my hand toward her. Our fingers nearly touched...

And then she pulled her hand away.

"Huh?"

I stood there blinking, but she closed her hand and shook her head gently. "It seems the moment is not come yet."

What, after stirring me up like that? It's a little late, señorita!

She lowered those long eyelashes and said wistfully, "But the time for the contract approaches. I believe I will see you again presently. So long as it be what is destined..."

"What in the world are you—"

Yes, I understood I wouldn't get any answers by finishing that question.

But I couldn't *not* ask. I still didn't have the slightest idea what was going on, even though this girl in front of me seemed satisfied enough.

"Then... I'll see you again."

"Wai—"

I reached out in a flash as if to stop her, but a second later, she was gone.

No...

"Huh...?!"

There was a rustling, and when I looked over, there she was: directly below the window, at the base of the tree.

Had she jumped down there?! We were two stories up!

I was just about flabbergasted when I noticed something very fine moving in the night breeze. There was some kind of wire attached to the branch on which she had been sitting. That must have been how she was able to get down without hurting herself.

She spun on her heel and left the mansion behind, quickly vanishing into the night-clad forest around us.

"What the heck was that...?" I wondered aloud, still conscious of my heart drumming in my chest.

Was I dreaming? Hallucinating? Or had it all been real?

I felt like I had started to get used to weird things happening, but even so, meeting that girl left me shaken. Something about it still felt unreal, like I really had met Suiren, come straight out of her anime.

It all gave me a lot to think about. What future would have awaited me if I had taken her hand?

"...Oops." I just realized. I hadn't even asked her name.

I was pretty sure it wasn't Suiren. Mostly sure.

"Seriously... What the heck..."

The night breeze tickled my cheek. It cooled the heat of my moment of excitement, as if washing away the last traces of proof that the girl had really been there.

That was it. It had all been a dream. I should just forget about it. Like an argument without words.

My name is Kanou Shinichi, and I *was* a perfectly normal high-schooler. Maybe the only thing that set me apart was that I was a home security guard.

(Paaaaaause.)

Hey... You there. Don't go away. And don't laugh, either. My heart is fragile like glass. I'll cry. I will.

Er, well, never mind.

Various and sundry circumstances led to my refusal to go to school; instead, I holed up in my room enjoying the neat life of a NEET. For better or for worse, though, my parents were not soft enough to let their son live the rest of his life as a shut-in.

To put it concretely, one day they busted down my door with a chainsaw, and (as logically follows) I was out pounding the pavement soon after.

You may be aware, though, that the economic situation these days isn't the greatest. For an otaku whose only work experience was as a security guard in his own house, it wasn't that easy to find a job. I didn't even have any particular qualifications. I figured my only hope was to try to find work in a field I had some expertise in, and so I traveled to that otaku Mecca, Akihabara, where I interviewed with a particular company.

So far, so good.

But this was where my daily life stopped adhering to common sense.

Believe it or not, this very first company I interviewed with greeted me with a drink of tea that turned out to have sleeping drugs in it. I drank the tea without so much as wondering whether it might be drugged, after which I was kidnapped and woke up to find myself in another world.

You heard me. Another world. Not Kansas anymore. An actual *isekai*.

Not only that, it turned out to be a fantasy land complete with dragons flying in the sky, humanoid races like elves and dwarves walking around town, and battles full of swords and sorcery. It was in this world that I was named General Manager of the general entertainment company, Amutech, an enterprise representing a pan-dimensional first. Specifically, the company had been founded to help spread otaku culture in this other world, and I had been selected to oversee it.

Ridiculous, right?

That's what I thought, too. At first.

I wondered what anyone had to gain from any of this. But things turned

out to be more serious than I had ever imagined.

You might be wondering, what do I mean by “another world,” anyway?

Well, exactly that: a world not our own. A place where the culture, environment, and everything else is different from Earth’s.

There’s a country here called the Holy Eldant Empire, and it turns out Japan is connected to it via a “hole” (scholars refer to it as a hyperspace wormhole) that exists underneath the Sea of Trees at Aokigahara, near Mount Fuji.

Japan might be an island chain, but it turns out it’s actually contiguous with a whole other world.

On learning of this fact, the Japanese government, hoping to keep this new world and its resources all to itself, decided to begin an investigation of what was on the other side of the hole. They did it secretly so no foreign countries would find out about what was going on.

Let me reiterate: we’re talking about a different world, here. Different life-forms, different culture, different resources, all there.

In short, a cornucopia waiting to be plundered. If the government played its hand right, Japan might even become one of the richest countries in the world. But if anyone else found out about it, they would come up with some excuse to swoop in and take the abundance of this other world for themselves.

During exploratory expeditions, the government made contact with the Holy Eldant Empire and succeeded in establishing a certain level of exchange. SF stories since time immemorial have warned of the risks of first contact—but in this case all that worry turned out to be for nothing. The number-one problem—the language barrier—was all but smashed by the magic on this side of the wormhole. In the end, it turned out a little talk went a long way.

That didn’t mean our two countries were all lovey-dovey, though. The Japanese government was trying to figure out the best way to get on good terms with the Holy Eldant Empire. They focused on mutual understanding of culture, the thing on which personal values and common sense are based, but something—maybe some difference in cultural standards, or who knows what—made the Eldant people cool toward all the stuff Japan showed them at first.

Obviously, in a place like this, where the level of technology was

relatively low, you could certainly shock them by showing off household electronics and other industrial goods. But the wormhole was surprisingly narrow, putting a hard limit on the size and number of objects that could be brought across—not to mention, suddenly moving a whole bunch of resources might attract the attention of foreign observers.

Starting to worry, the government proceeded by trial and error. This produced an unexpected result: the thing the Eldant people responded to most was modern entertainment, especially manga, anime, and video games. In other words, otaku stuff.

That led to a whole new problem for the government: namely, that none of the bureaucrats knew the first thing about otaku culture. They just didn't *get* it. On the one hand, they recognized that it could be a surprising source of export income, and so they tried to promote it to other countries on Earth with initiatives like Cool Japan. But on the other, they also did everything they could to control and regulate it. Suffice to say, they didn't have eyes to see otaku culture clearly.

The solution, they decided, was to find someone who did. But the whole point here was to keep everything top secret. They couldn't go bringing a famous creator or academic to this other world. Ideally, they would find someone who could just disappear one day without causing any special concern—someone with so little clout that if by chance the whole plan went south, they could blame everything on this person.

They were just waiting for an ignorant otaku to swallow the bait they'd set. And I, Kanou Shinichi, did. Hook, line, and sinker.

In my defense, I think I was kind of naïve at the time. Look, not only had they recognized my "talents" as an otaku, but they told me my beloved anime and games and manga were going to help build bridges with a whole new world. On behalf of all otakudom, I decided to give it my best shot.

And I did. Or at least, I feel like I did. I soon found that the Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire had taken a shine to me, and things were going swimmingly.

But then one day, I began to catch on to something. I started to see that what the Japanese government was after wasn't cultural exchange: it was cultural invasion. Japan had no intention of having a relationship of equals with the Eldant Empire. They wanted to make the place a vassal state, a part of Japan. And this was just a ploy to get their way.

When you hear the word *invasion*, maybe you think of the military, but that wouldn't have been very practical in this case. A major mobilization of Self-Defense Force units would have alerted other countries, and anyway, the wormhole was too small to bring over most military equipment. Coming through the portal with a show of overwhelming force was a transdimensional pipe dream. Not to mention, the Holy Eldant Empire did have magic, and no one was sure whether modern human technology was actually strong enough to triumph against it.

All these considerations were what made the Japanese government decide to take the cultural route. They grabbed a page from the playbook of any number of empires of the past and began by introducing the population of their target country to their own culture, so that it would be easier for the people to accept Japanese rule later.

And although I eventually caught on to this, I wasn't the first to do so. The Eldant people were way ahead of me.

A group calling themselves Bedouna, claiming to be an "assembly of patriots," attacked the "cultural invader" (that is, me). Given that, at the time, I was still under the impression that I was out there spreading otaku culture in the name of interworld friendship, being called an invader was quite a shock.

After that incident, I rebelled against the Japanese government—a course that led to them sending in a special forces unit to eliminate me. It all became a big to-do.

Even after I survived that, a lot happened: we had the first soccer tournament ever seen in Eldant. A video clip of the same leaked on the internet back home, so we produced a movie in order to cover it up. That led to my kidnapping by Eldant's neighbor, the Kingdom of Bahairam.

Suffice to say, since coming to this world, my life had been anything but boring. And honestly, I'd been having fun. I had a sense of fulfillment I could never have imagined during my time as a home security guard. I had met all kinds of people, gotten to try all sorts of different things, and stayed so busy I hardly so much as had time to feel down. I had almost started to think that being general manager of the entertainment company Amutech, being the prophet of otakuism here in Eldant, was pretty much my calling. But pride goeth before the fall.

I had been getting altogether too optimistic. Or to put it more directly, I

hadn’t given the Japanese government enough credit. Sending in a special ops squad to murder an ordinary teenage boy had to be some sort of last resort, right? Since the assassination attempt had failed, the government had been so docile that I’d even started to think they had given up; that they were just going to leave me alone and let me do what I’d supposedly come here to do.

But of course, they hadn’t given up on anything.

Least of all the cultural invasion of the Eldant Empire...

I took a deep breath of the clear morning air. The chill spread through my body, helping my brain gradually shake the haze of sleep.

“Mmmm~!”

Having changed out of my pajamas and into my day clothes, I left my room and headed for the dining area downstairs. I expected everyone would be there already. I hadn’t fallen asleep until so late the night before, and then I’d had that weird dream, so even when Myusel came to wake me up like she always did, I found myself staring vacantly into space for a while. Getting dressed had felt like a lot of trouble.

As I came down the staircase, my stomach gurgled as if to urge me to hurry up.

Back when I’d been a shut-in, I had a pretty pathetic excuse for a daily rhythm. Usually I didn’t even eat breakfast. But since arriving in the Eldant Empire, my attitude had completely changed, and now I hardly felt the day had started without the morning meal.

“Mornin’,” I said.

“Good morning, Master,” came a voice as pleasant as a ringing bell. The first person to greet me this morning was the maid, hard at work setting the table.

Myusel Fourant.

She was the first person I had met after I arrived in this world, and one of the people most responsible for making possible my life in this mansion, including doing the cooking and laundry. She was dedicated and pure and sweet—but also a bit shy and clumsy. She was adorable, but also lovable, a

half-elf maid-san who could soothe your cares just by being around. *The heck?! She was the full package! Did they want me to die of moe-ness?!* was what I wondered, but Myusel herself never seemed to notice the effect she had on me.

Even now her long, flaxen hair, tied into twintails, swung behind her each time she moved, each gentle swish of her hair revealing her pale, pointy ears. What could be cuter?

Ah! Thank you, God, that I was born an otaku!

"Morning, Shinichi-kun."

This next greeting came from a girl who was seated at the table and fiddling with her smartphone. She was probably checking the schedule for the day.

This was Koganuma Minori-san.

Minori-san was a WAC; that is, a woman in the JSDF—and she was also my bodyguard. Her soldier's uniform and the way she kept her hair in a neat bun made her look kind of uptight, but the soft eyes visible behind her glasses and my view of her face in profile didn't seem intimidating at all. If anything, she came across like a gentle older sister.

"Breakfast is almost ready," Myusel said with a smile like a blossoming flower as she urged me to one of the seats. I sat down next to Minori-san.

"Huh? Are we it?" I asked. I had expected to be the last one to arrive, but we still only had about half the population of the household here.

"I think everyone else will be here soon," Minori-san said, sliding her phone into her pocket.

And indeed, at that very moment...

"Yaaawn... Goof morningh."

As if on cue, two more people entered the dining area. One was a young woman unsuccessfully trying to stifle a yawn. Her chest was covered in nothing more than a piece of cloth, while down below she wore baggy pants; the outfit left her shoulders and midriff completely exposed. Oddly enough, she still didn't come across as sexy, exactly. Her taut body, free of any unnecessary fat, just looked toned and healthy.

This was Elvia Harneiman. Dangling alongside her leaf-brown hair was a pair of big, floppy ears, although it could be hard to tell because they were the same color as her hair. On her butt was a furry tail, also the same color. That tail looked really soft, and every time I saw it I had to fight the urge to

feel how fluffy it was.

Elvia was a beast person—a werewolf. There was a whole story about how she had ended up in this mansion with us, but basically she was originally a spy sent here by the neighboring country of Bahairam. Not that she ever seemed very intent on spying.

"G'mornin'..."

Beside her was Brooke Darwin. He was similar to Elvia in that they both had a certain animal-ish-ness to them, but he gave an altogether different sort of impression. At first glance, Brooke looked just like a walking lizard—which made some sense, because he was one of the people known as lizardmen. But it wasn't just his face that was reptilian. His people were cold-blooded, laid eggs—they might have been kissing cousins to actual reptiles.

Brooke was my gardener, and the second person I had met in this world. I had to admit, he could be scary: he looked pretty tough, like if you tried to hit him, you would be the one who ended up getting hurt. Plus, it was hard to tell what he was thinking, and he tended to seem a little tired in the morning because his body temperature hadn't risen yet. But by now I knew he actually had a warmth (if you will) and really was, as it were, a man among men.

"Sorry for the wait."

Myusel withdrew into the kitchen, perhaps to get the food, and almost as if changing places with her, the fifth member of our little band came out: Cerise Darwin.

She was Brooke's wife, and also a lizardman. Wait, she was female, so would that make her a lizardwoman?

They had been living apart for a time, but a series of fortunate events brought them back together, and now she lived and worked here with Brooke. The maid uniform looked a little weird on her, and her lizard-like face made her, like Brooke, kind of hard to read, but we all knew that she was really sweet. And also that, like Myusel, she could be a bit clumsy at times. But for the most part, it wasn't a problem. Nobody here was going to get all upset over some little stumble.

"Everything's ready," she said, and set out breakfast for herself and Brooke.

The two of them were biologically pretty different from the rest of us,

and they had different tastes—what they liked to eat just wasn't what we liked, so there were special meals just for the two lizardmen. There was also the question of class: I gathered that in the Holy Eldant Empire, lizardmen would never be allowed to eat with people of other races, but of course, having grown up in Japan, I had no such qualms.

And so it was that we all found ourselves at the same table.

"Mm. Looks like we're all here."

Elvia and Brooke sat down, as did Myusel and Cerise as they finished the breakfast preparations. There was still a sense that some spots at the table were more honorable than others, but at least we were all eating together.

The people facing each other at this table represented the entire population of the mansion.

I looked around at everyone, then brought my hands together in a gesture of thanks. "Well, as they say where I come from—*itadakimasu*! Let's dig in!"

This was a Japanese custom, obviously, but somewhere along the line everyone else had gotten into the habit of making the same gesture before they ate. Maybe they were just imitating me, as I was technically, somehow, the most important person in the household.

"Let's dig in!" everyone chorused, reaching out with spoons and forks. I didn't feel they really had to wait for me, but I knew no one would have touched their food if I hadn't taken my first bite. Everyone reciting a phrase in unison like that was slightly embarrassing, kind of like we were still in grade school, but at the same time I sort of enjoyed it. It really helped me feel like the meal had started.

"Mm!" I exclaimed when I tasted the food. The meals Myusel made were always delicious. They were so consistently good, in fact, that frankly I thought she could have afforded to screw up every once in a while. But I never got tired of them. She claimed once that when she went to wake everyone up, she took note of how they were feeling and changed the ingredients a little bit to suit everyone's condition.

What was she, a master chef?!

I've heard the expression "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach," and I've kind of got to agree. Some people say food is love; isn't that basically a way of saying that your dedication and care come through in

the delicacy of the flavor? Myusel was beautiful, yes, but I think even if she hadn't been, she still would have had plenty of suitors.

I was mulling all this over when there came a deep yawn. It practically made me feel sleepy just hearing it.

The persistent yawning was coming from Elvia, seated across from me.

"You sound pretty tired, Elvia," I said.

"Aw, I just... Once I started drawing, I couldn't stop, and all of a sudden it was dawn..."

I smiled as I watched her rub her eyes. Elvia was Amutech's in-house artist. At least, that was what we called her for publicity purposes. It was true enough that she drew pictures, and she had thrown herself into learning about the art style of that mysterious foreign country, Japan. In other words, learning how to draw in the "anime" or "manga" style.

She really was a talented artist, but she did sometimes get swept away in her own work. Sometimes she would forget to eat or sleep.

"I'm glad you're working so hard, but make sure you get your sleep, okay?"

"Yeeaahwwn," she said, trying to agree and also stifle another yawn. She munched away at her food.

Her answer didn't exactly convince me that she was truly on board, but at least she was here for breakfast.

Minori-san, Myusel, and I smiled at each other, and I grabbed another piece of bread from the communal basket.

That was when a quiet, brisk voice said, "Good morning."

I looked up, shocked, in the direction of the door. I knew that voice, but I had never heard it at breakfast before.

"Matoba-san?" Minori-san got to her feet, looking ever so slightly panicked.

"Hullo," the besuited, middle-aged man said from the entry of the dining room. His outfit was impeccable, but he still somehow seemed a little... beat-up. Maybe that was because he was basically a middle manager. His always narrow eyes squinted still further in a characteristic smile. He looked like a harmless older man. *Looked* like.

His name was Matoba Jinzaburou. He was nominally chief of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau, the man on the ground for Japan's other-world diplomacy. To put it simply, he was Minori-san's and

my boss.

While Minori-san generally helped me out with what amounted to physical labor, Matoba-san was all about the administrative side of things—procuring any resources I needed and taking care of whatever else I needed help with. You could think of him as part of Amutech's inner circle.

Personally, though, I considered him a bit of a last resort. I didn't entirely trust him.

Matoba-san was essentially the intermediary between me and everyone over my head in the Japanese government, and in that role he had defended me several times. But that didn't change the fact that I often didn't know what he was really thinking behind that innocent smile. I won't say that he was evil or ruthless or anything, but he was capable of dropping someone like a hot potato if the need arose, smiling the whole time. He had almost done it to me, once.

But anyway.

Matoba-san came and went between Japan and the Eldant Empire pretty frequently, so there were regular stretches when he wasn't around. He didn't live at the mansion, anyway. It was unusual to see him here so early.

"What brings you here so—"

I practically choked on the end of my sentence. Someone else emerged from behind Matoba-san, moving so gracefully it almost looked like they weighed nothing at all.

It wasn't the first time I had seen this person.

I'd met them before... just a few hours ago, in fact.

"You're—"

She wore a dress of deep violet with lots of frills. There were ribbons on her boots the same color as her dress. She looked just like Suiren, sprung straight out of the *Rose Princess* anime. It had been just last night when—or was that this morning? It didn't matter. She looked exactly the way she had when she was sitting in that tree branch. Wait... So that wasn't a dream?!

"Hm?" Matoba-san seemed surprised by my reaction. "What seems to be the matter, Shinichi-kun? Do you know this girl, perchance?"

"In passing."

It wasn't me, but her, who answered. The girl looked at me, her lips ever so slightly upturned.

Now that I saw her in the light, I could see how pretty she really was.

Her outfit had long sleeves and lots of decoration, but her bare shoulders gave a fairly good idea of her build. She had fine hands and wrists, and her shoulders were narrow. The overall impression was of delicate-ness, as if she were made of glass. It was almost like she would break if you hugged her too hard.

"This is Ayasaki Hikaru-kun," Matoba-san said, "Amutech's newest employee. And starting today, Shinichi-kun, your assistant."

"Huh?" I gaped. This was, to say the least, unexpected.

Hikaru-san, for her part, simply smiled at me; she seemed to know all about this already.

"I was born as the light that guides the darkness. Yes, you." She started walking towards me. I just sat and stared dumbly. Hikaru-san bent down to look in my face. There was something elegant in the gesture, along with the suggestion of something hidden but immensely powerful.

"I told you, didn't I?" she said. "I am the light that guides the darkness. I said we would meet again, if it was destined."

"Uh.....huh."

This was bad. There was chuunibyou and then there was chuunibyou, and I was nowhere near quick enough to come up with an appropriate comeback on the spot.

It was Minori-san who spoke up instead.

"I didn't hear anything about this," she said to Matoba-san, an edge in her voice.

I certainly hadn't, either. You'd think they would tell the general manager when they were planning to hire someone new. Then again, you could argue that a general manager basically hired as a puppet doesn't have a lot of input into these things anyway...

Minori-san, though, was in a somewhat different position. She was my bodyguard, and insofar as she was also charged with protecting all the Japanese employees of Amutech, she might rightly expect to be informed when someone new was going to come in.

Then there was the little fact that I had been kidnapped by Bahairam just the other day. It was only natural for Minori-san to be on edge, and now she found out she had someone else to guard without any warning or time to prepare. It practically qualified as a crisis.

Myusel, Elvia, Brooke, and Cerise were all startled by this turn of

events, sitting frozen in the middle of their meals. That made sense: if I hadn't known about this, they definitely hadn't.

"Very sorry," Matoba-san said with a bit of a shrug. "It's been so busy recently. I just never had a chance to talk to you."

Minori-san was silent, but her expression was dangerous. I wasn't exactly sure, but I got the impression that she knew something I didn't, and that it made this increase in Amutech's staff all the more dubious to her.

"I get that you've been busy, but this is just too sudden," I said, breaking into the conversation between Minori-san and Matoba-san. "And why now?"

True, we were shorthanded at the school, and we had a lot on our plates in terms of figuring out new ways to spread otaku culture and start selling otaku merchandise. But still, why foist someone on us in such a rush?

It was Hikaru-san who answered. "The gears of fate always turn suddenly. But there is no coincidence that isn't also the vehicle of destiny. There needs be no reason; it is ever now."

Uh... okay. Still not making any sense.

"Well, there you have it," Matoba-san said.

"There we have what?!" I exclaimed, but Matoba-san and Hikaru-san both just gave me those ambiguous smiles.

"I really am sorry for dropping this on you," Matoba-san said, "but it's already been decided."

There it was. That famous bureaucratic excuse, "it's already decided"! Hey, here's an idea: how about you be decent enough to talk to us *before* you decide things? But I knew how that would go. "It's not up to you to make these decisions."

Gosh...

"If you'll excuse me, I have to get back to Japan immediately. Lots of things to take care of, you know. Play nice with Hikaru-kun, now."

Without waiting for an answer—as if he had finally finished reading a script he had prepared in advance—Matoba-san saw himself out of the dining area.

And that left us with...

"I look forward to working with you all," Hikaru-san said, smiling.

She played with the hem of her Gothic-Loli dress, bowing theatrically to everyone. I wanted to demand where (and for that matter, when) she'd

come from, but coming from her, the gesture was oddly fitting.

Holy Eldant Castle.

The place was so important, it simply took the entire country's name for its own. It was the residence of Her Majesty the Empress and the political heart of the Empire. If this castle were ever to fall, it would literally be the end of the country. The building was made from a hollowed-out mountain using magic. It was big enough to be an entire city, had the defenses of a military installation, and was just generally impregnable.

Its grandeur was more than enough to overwhelm anyone who saw it. I remembered the very first time I had come to the castle—I had practically panicked, with no idea what to do with a building that big. As it happened, at that initial meeting with the empress, I had said a few impolitic things, unaware of what thin ice I was on, which had resulted in me taking a royal right hook—but anyway, forget about that.

"It's quite incredible," Hikaru-san said as she approached the castle with me and Minori-san. But unlike my own first experience of the building, she sounded perfectly calm. In fact, between her clothing and her chuunibyou behavior, it practically seemed like this must be par for the course for her. I with my jeans and T-shirt, and Minori-san in the dark-green jacket and tight skirt of her military uniform, looked far more out of place than Hikaru-san did.

And then we were in the audience chamber.

"Is this, then, Ayasaki Hikaru?"

Looking down at us from the throne on the far end of the room was a little girl (okay, a young woman—she was pretty sensitive on this point, so it was best to correct yourself, even mentally) with long silver hair and a magnificent crown on her head.

Petralka an Eldant III.

She was so small physically that you could picture her with an elementary schooler's backpack on, but she was actually sixteen, just a year younger than me—not to mention the single most powerful person in the entire Eldant Empire. People didn't call her Your Majesty for nothing.

Royals and nobles seem to like to marry beautiful people, leading to families full of handsome men and gorgeous women—and Petralka was a classic case. Yes, Hikaru-san had something of an otherworldly beauty about her, but Petralka was still on another level. I had become relatively friendly with the empress, but even so, there were moments when I wondered with an apologetic feeling whether it was okay for me to even occupy the same dimension as her. I felt like a caricature from some shounen gag manga who had accidentally wandered into the flowery world of a shoujo romance.

"Yes, milady. It is my immense honor and pleasure to make the Imperial acquaintance," Hikaru-san said from beside me, with a respectful bow of her head.

After Matoba-san left, we had ended up coming over here to the castle. We'd already had plans to make our report to Petralka about the current state of Amutech's affairs, anyway. We just decided to bring Hikaru-san along and introduce her.

Amutech operated freely in the Eldant Empire largely due to the empress's good offices, so it was only right that we introduce any new staff members to Her Majesty. Especially one who was supposed to be my personal assistant.

"We hear you have come from Japan to be Shinichi's helper." Petralka looked at Hikaru-san through narrowed eyes. She put a finger to her chin as if she were thinking about something—or maybe as if she had already figured it out.

Really, it was only natural for her to react that way when we showed up suddenly saying we had a new staff member from Japan that we wanted to introduce to her. Incidentally, sometimes these audiences consisted solely of me, Minori-san, and Petralka, perhaps along with the minister Garius en Cordobal, the head of the royal guard—but today, perhaps because of the introductions, there were several royal knights lined up along the wall, swords at their hips.

"It is as Your Majesty says," Hikaru-san answered, not raising her head. "I've heard much of Your Majesty, as well. For example, how you had the clarity of vision to become one of the first adopters of Japan's entertainment, or how you learned to converse in the Japanese language in quite a short period of time. I envy the people of this empire, who live

under such a wise and visionary ruler. Let me reiterate how grateful I am for the opportunity to finally meet you this day."

She reeled all this off without missing a beat. For her first imperial audience, she seemed awfully comfortable here. I couldn't help but think back on my own first meeting with Petralka, where despite having been told to watch my mouth, I managed to misspeak and nearly get my head cut off. (Looking back on it now, the whole thing sort of makes me smile.) Determined, as the more experienced hand here, not to embarrass myself, I gently cleared my throat.

"I apologize for how sudden this is," I said.

"Well, we already had room in our schedule this morning to hear your report, Shinichi. So this is no disruption as such..." Petralka then turned to Hikaru-san. "Hikaru. Let us see your face."

"Milady." Hikaru-san looked up. Her dark hair cascaded around her shoulders, her face with its perfect features meeting Petralka's.

Ooh! Two beautiful girls gazing at each other!

"Mm," Petralka grunted, her finely formed eyebrows coming together.

I had been getting the impression that Petralka was upset about something—that there was something about Hikaru-san that she didn't like. Even though, as far as I could tell, Hikaru-san's greeting had been impeccable.

"So the ranks of women around you have increased again, have they?"

"Er...?"

"Minori, Myusel, Elvia, and now this Hikaru... How many women will it take before you are satisfied?"

Um... Excuse me, Your Majesty, but are you talking to me*?*

"W-Wait a second! That's not—!" I shook my head vigorously. "I only just met Ayasaki-san this morning! In fact, I'd never even heard of her before that!"

It wasn't as if I was begging them to send more women my way. Yes, I know I had somehow ended up with a lot of female boarders in my mansion! And yes, it was definitely enough to make you start wondering if this was a harem or something! But there was nothing behind it! At least, not for me! Look, if I could bring about such an awesome situation on my own, I would have—er, you know what? Never mind about that!

Incidentally, one could also count Cerise among the ranks of women at

my mansion. The fact that Petralka hadn't mentioned her was probably because she was a lizardman, and Brooke's wife, so the empress didn't really count her.

"We wonder how far we should trust you," Petralka said, now clearly unhappy. Her green eyes were full of doubt. Then she looked at my new companion. "Be wary, Ayasaki Hikaru. This man loves women's chests, especially big ones. Give him half a chance, and he'll come up with some plan to enlarge your bust."

"Will you stop with that already?! There was never any plan!" I cried. "And anyway, I like big and small boobs equally! I don't discriminate based on bust size! Big, jiggly ones that are heavy as ripe fruit and flat, even plains are both equally wonderful! But! If you still insist on a ranking, I think the crucial element isn't size—but sensitivity!"

I had started unconsciously shouting and clenching my fist.

"Yes! For example, say that through pure and total coincidence, you get a lucky but perverted break, and although you had absolutely no intention to, you end up touching them—and that alone is enough to make her exclaim 'Ahn!' That itself elevates her from unsullied maiden to goddess of abundant love!"

There was silence all around. For some reason, I felt like Petralka and Minori-san were both giving me the coldest stares of my life, but it was probably just my imagination. Yeah. That was it.

"Well, er, anyway!" I said, clearing my throat and pointedly returning the conversation to the topic at hand, "Ayasaki-san will be working with me starting today. Will that be all right?"

"Certainly, we have no reason to prevent you from increasing the number of capable personnel around you," Petralka said hesitantly. She shot a glance at the beautiful young man beside her. "Garius, do you approve of this?"

He was the noble, Garius en Cordobal, whose name I've mentioned before. He was both Petralka's relative and her closest confidant.

He was also good-looking as hell. Tall and slim, but toned and muscular in all the right places, so he never gave any impression of weakness or fragility. He had a face to match—almond-shaped eyes, the kind of profile that made girls swoon and cry "So *cute*!" at just a glance.

But he wasn't quite... interested in that sort of thing, if you take my

meaning. He seemed to prefer the company of men, and what's more, he didn't try very hard to hide it. Well, I guess even in Japan, homosexual love between men only became taboo under the Confucian polices of the Edo era. Maybe it wasn't even a big thing here in Eldant.

The upshot, though, was that every once in a while I felt like my chastity was in danger around him. To be perfectly honest, I wasn't always sure how to handle myself around the beautiful knight.

Speaking of Petralka's confidantes, there was one more, an old man called Prime Minister Zahar, but I didn't see him today. It wasn't that surprising; he kept pretty busy.

In any event, Garius was silent.

"Garius?" Petralka said, looking at him questioningly.

"Hrm?" Garius seemed to come back to himself then, blinking a few times and then bowing his head respectfully toward Petralka. "My apologies, Your Majesty."

"What's the matter? This is most unusual."

She was right; Garius didn't typically act this way. He would never normally ignore her when she spoke to him. In fact, I think this was the first time I had ever seen him zone out like that.

"Something about Hikaru seems to have had your attention throughout this entire audience."

"...Hrm."

"Could it be love at first sight?" Petralka asked teasingly.

She, of course, knew all about his preferences. That made Minori-san and me smile in spite of ourselves. A wry look also came over Garius's face. Next he would offer a bantering denial, and then...

"Yes, I suppose so." He nodded, then added, "She is most wonderful."

.....

"Huh?!"

"Wha?!"

Sounds of disbelief came from all our mouths at once. I could see Minori-san's eyes open wide behind her glasses, and even Petralka seemed taken aback, looking like she might jump up from her throne.

"G-G-G-Garius?"

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"What has come over you? Do you have a fever?"

Yeah... a fever. That's what causes this sort of thing.

Nonetheless, Petralka's surprise was certainly real. Garius had never given any indication of being interested in a woman; even the fact that he got along pretty well with Minori-san was largely because they shared a hobby—specifically, BL.

And anyway, why was Garius looking at me...?

"Shinichi."

"Y-Yes?!"

"You could learn something from her."

"Like wha—"

But even as I spoke, I figured it out.

Ah. He means... like that.

When he issued his judgment of "wonderful" about Hikaru-san, he didn't just mean her outward appearance, but her politeness, her propriety, and so on and so forth.

It was true that, unlike me, she didn't seem to be in any danger of getting punched out for saying the wrong thing at her very first meeting with the empress. In my case, Petralka happened to have taken a liking to my disregard for traditional politesse, and ever since that beginning she had never insisted that I stand on ceremony. But regardless of how I felt about manners, it could never hurt me to at least keep them in mind. Garius was right; I certainly could learn from Hikaru-san in that respect.

I was just mulling over the implications when Minori-san, sounding scandalized, exclaimed, "H-How could you? Minister Cordobal, I thought you were truly and only devoted to Shinichi-kun!"

Hey, listen, you rotten fujoshi. Don't take this conversation in any weird directions.

"What about my dreams? My fantasies?! My whole scenario where you pretend to be a cool lone wolf, but behind it all you really do have a heart, and your kindness slowly brings the otherwise totally straight Shinichi-kun around until...!"

"Minori-san... You're remembering we can hear you, right?"

Hey... When did you start writing me into your fanfiction, anyway?!

"Oh, but then it turns out he actually swings both ways, and finds himself becoming more and more serious about Minister Cordobal. A bittersweet Gari/Shin crossover! Or would that be Shin/Gari?"

“Will you stop it already?!” I exclaimed, sounding a little more desperate than I meant to.

Man... If it weren’t for *this* little quirk, she would be the perfect older-sister character.

Hikaru-san didn’t pay our banter (??) much mind, but bowed politely and said, “It is an honor, I assure you.”

She was the picture of composure, as if the ridiculous jabbering of those around her didn’t bother her in the least. I didn’t know what level of otaku she was, but maybe she really would make a good assistant for someone like me, who tended to freak out a bit too easily.

“Ahem. Anyway,” Petralka said, clearing her throat, “Ayasaki Hikaru, we commend you as Shinichi’s assistant, and have no special objections. Now then—”

Petralka sat herself back on her throne, then her expression briefly flickered. She seemed hesitant, almost shy; it was an unusual look for her.

“We wish to ask you something.”

Her gaze settled on Hikaru-san. Or... more specifically, Hikaru-san’s outfit.

“Is it possible that those are the clothes of Suiren, from *Rose Princess*?”

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who had noticed. Come to think of it, I had lent the *Rose Princess* manga to Petralka not too long ago, right up to the most recent volume. She seemed to like it a lot, and since I’d gotten my hands on the anime, she had been fitting in episodes between her public duties...

“Yes, ma’am. Indeed they are,” Hikaru-san said. “I had it on good authority that *Rose Princess* is a favorite of Your Majesty’s.”

Ahh, so that was it.

When I’d submitted the paperwork to Matoba-san requisitioning the *Rose Princess* anime DVDs, I had added a note to the effect that Petralka seemed to enjoy it. I’d included that detail on the assumption that it would speed up the delivery from Japan. Matoba-san had probably passed the information on to Hikaru-san.

So it wasn’t so much her own interests that led her to dress like this; it was specifically in order to be seen by Petralka. A sort of performance, almost.

“Excuse me,” Hikaru-san murmured, and rose up slowly. Then she said,

“Have I pleased you, Your Majesty?” Her tone and inflection had changed, and she cocked her head just a little bit. Suddenly, she was the spitting image of Suiren from the anime.

“Oh-ho...” Petralka was probably thinking the same thing as me; she was nodding vigorously, a big smile on her face. “A most convincing impression!”

“I’m honored.”

Performance it may have been, but it appeared to have won Petralka over entirely. She continued nodding as she glanced at me. “You seem rather more adept than the average boor who exclaims ‘IS THAT ***REALLY*** AN ARCHETYPAL LITTLE-GIRL CHARACTER?!’ the moment he sees us.”

“Hey, come on, I apologized for that already...”

Much like the boob thing, I had a sneaking suspicion I was never going to live that down.

Petralka smirked at me (did I detect a hint of malice?), then turned back to Hikaru-san. “We hope you shall be most dedicated to your work as Shinichi’s assistant.”

“It shall be my honor and pleasure, Your Majesty.” Hikaru-san tugged at the hem of her skirt and dipped her head in a curtsy.

What could I say? She really was practically perfect in every way.

Let’s talk about the so-called General Entertainment Provider Amutech.

From the name, you might guess that its main activities revolve around the importing and distribution of entertainment products. And they certainly should—but as a matter of fact, that was still a goal for us, not what we were actually doing.

In our defense, the literacy rate in the Holy Eldant Empire and the surrounding countries was not very high, so there weren’t a lot of people capable of reading manga or light novels, even if they were to be translated into the local language. The magic rings some of us wore helped to telepathically translate the thoughts of two people who were speaking face-to-face, but they were only good for in-person conversations and couldn’t

translate words coming from a machine, which had neither magic nor thoughts. We had floated the idea of doing Eldant-language dubs, but that would be on top of the work of translation, and presumably ADR dubbing was not a well-developed industry here.

This meant that it was a pretty limited slice of society that could enjoy otaku culture for the time being. In principle, of course, it was always possible to try to sell a smaller number of items at a higher price rather than selling a bunch at a lower one, and indeed we had a pilot program going on that model. The *Rose Princess* manga and DVDs I had given to Petralka were one example. But as for me personally, I wanted as many people as possible to be able to enjoy otaku products.

To me, that meant we should start by helping more people learn to read.

And that meant education.

Hence, Amutech's primary activity at the moment was running a school. This school was being operated as a joint venture between the Japanese government and the Holy Eldant Empire, and theoretically it was open to anyone of any race, whether noble or commoner. True, in spite of my intentions, most of the current pupils were the children of the upper crust—nobles or rich merchants—as the whole idea of "learning" by going to a building where you were instructed in reading, writing, and other knowledge didn't really exist among the commoners. But I was still aiming to gradually increase the percentage of non-noble students. That, I hoped, would bring up the literacy rate of the entire country.

My reasoning seemed to be more or less on target so far. As more and more students became able to read and write Japanese, I found myself with a cadre of people who were capable of translating light novels and manga from Japan into the Eldant language.

The school also served as something of a microcosm of the larger society. By introducing otaku works at school and observing the reaction, it was possible to get a sense of what sort of reception they might get in the Holy Eldant Empire as a whole, or even this entire other world.

Anyway, that was the story. I was at the school five and a half days a week. Not as a student, obviously. I was teaching Japanese language along with otaku culture.

Given that I naturally expected to have my new assistant Hikaru-san help out with teaching duties at some point in the future, I figured it

wouldn't be bad for her to at least get a look at the place. And so, after we concluded our audience at the castle, we headed as usual for the school.

"Here it is! Our proud institute of education," I said, standing in front of the school and gesturing for Hikaru-san's benefit.

The building was actually a renovated grain silo. The creation of the exterior had been handled by the Holy Eldant Empire, but the interior design and all the equipment had come courtesy of the JSDF—since I had a free hand, I decided to make it as much like a Japanese middle or high school as I could.

"Hmm," Hikaru-san said with interest, looking at the building.

"We get power from the windmill and the solar battery panels you can see over there. Other than Amutech's mansion and the JSDF base, it's the only building in Eldant with electricity. Not a lot of it, granted. We mostly use it to run the computers, projectors, tape decks, and such."

I looked back from the windmill to Hikaru-san, then ushered my new acquaintance inside.

We still had ten or fifteen minutes until the school day started. Students were milling about in the hallway; they bowed politely and greeted me whenever they passed by. Today, however, they were looking less at me and Minori-san and more at Hikaru-san.

Fair enough, I guess. Their teacher had shown up with a stranger in tow. Someone obviously not from the Eldant Empire, moreover—a girl in a Gothic-Loli costume. The students had to be wondering who she was. Like Petralka, some of them probably noticed that she looked like Suiren.

"So, what is it you usually do for class?" Hikaru-san asked as we walked along.

"Oh, lots of different things." I stopped in the doorway of the classroom. "Mostly we focus on reading and writing, but we do general education, too. After all, how else are they supposed to enjoy stuff set in modern Japan, like school rom-coms?"

Unlike alternate-world fantasy or SF stories set in the future, romantic comedies set in the modern day assumed a certain worldview and a specific kind of "common sense." They were written on the understanding that readers would share this knowledge with the book, so we wanted to make those stories as accessible as possible to our students.

"Today we've got..."

“Sensei!”

Just as I was calling up the day’s schedule on my phone, several students came up to us from the classroom. It looked like their curiosity had gotten the better of them—they could no longer restrain themselves from coming over to find out about Hikaru-san. Besides the students who had called out to me, several more were looking on with obvious interest.

“Have you brought us a new teacher, Sensei?”

One boy was speaking on behalf of the group—an elf named Loek. He was tall and slim; even his face seemed narrow. He was handsome in a way that just screamed “elf.” He was pretty easy to spot among the gaggle of students: he came from a good background and had become something of a leader among the elves in the classroom.

Four other students had accompanied him to talk to me. Two stood on his left and two on his right in a sort of half-circle. Three guys, two girls—and now that I looked closer, I saw, all elves.

“She probably will be eventually,” I said, “but she only just got here today, so I thought I would bring her along just to see how we do things and maybe help me out a bit. Her name is Ayasaki Hikaru-san.”

“I look forward to seeing you all in class,” Hikaru-san said with a delicate nod of her head.

Faced with her gentle smile, the boys—even Loek, who was traditionally a *Minori-san LOVE!* stalwart—turned red and speechless. From a human perspective, male and female elves alike tended to look very beautiful, but maybe to them it was Hikaru-san who was stunning.

The girls, in contrast, weren’t struck dumb: they were looking at Hikaru-san’s clothes with admiration.

“That outfit is so *cute*!”

You’d think Gothic-Loli might already be a thing here in the Eldant Empire, but it really wasn’t. For these girls, Hikaru-san’s outfit probably seemed like a fresh new style direct from the source. And despite this being a fantasyland in another dimension, the reaction was pretty much the same as it would have been in our world.

The girls chattered and exclaimed.

“Hey, is that—”

“You’re right! It’s Suiren from *Rose Princess*!”

Hikaru-san, however, remained calm and composed. “You like it? Thank

you very much.”

Maybe she was already used to this sort of reaction, especially after dealing with Petralka.

“It’s wonderful! I wish I could wear something like that.”

“Would you like to try it on sometime?” Hikaru-san suggested with a smile. “I’m not quite sure it would fit you, but we could make a few simple adjustments.”

“Wha...?” The girl’s eyes went wide. “D-Do you really mean it?!”

“I’m sure it would look better on you. I happened to wear my Suiren outfit today, but I also have Shin-ku and Konpekisei ones.”

“Hooray!” The girls grabbed each other’s hands and jumped up and down.

When they saw this, the students who had been keeping their distance began to filter over to us. Hikaru-san didn’t look unhappy about this; she smilingly answered the questions the students peppered her with.

Nice. I think she’s going to fit right in here.

But just as I was feeling this rush of relief...

“I’m *telling* you, you’re wrong!”

The harmonious atmosphere was shattered with the *bam!* of someone pounding on a desk.

Startled, I looked in the direction of the sound. “What the heck?”

Over in one corner of the classroom, an elf girl and a dwarf girl were glaring at each other. I had to assume they were fighting, because both of them looked hopping mad.

Elves and dwarves were both of the faerie races, but despite that, they never really got along. They seemed to dislike each other even more than they disliked beast people. Maybe you always hate what you are, or something. In any event, squabbles between them were common. But I couldn’t just stand there and let them argue.

“What’s going on, you two?” I said, working my way past the gaggle of students and over to the two debaters. “Why are you fighting?”

As I broke in between them, the two simply stared silently at each other for another moment—but then, perhaps realizing that it wasn’t getting them anywhere, they both turned to me and started talking simultaneously.

“Sensei! Hear me out!”

“What do you think, Sensei?!”

The dwarf produced a DVD case. On the cover, against a black background, a character with a mask and a red cape stood back-to-back with a character wearing a helmet and a blue cape. The title was written at the bottom: *Order of the Dark Knights: Zero's Revenge* Vol. 1.

It was an anime that had finished airing last year and whose final DVD volume had recently come out. It was about a young boy who gains a mysterious power, then tries to take over the world in the guise of the masked man Zero. I had watched it myself. The manga had gotten a positive reaction from the students, so just like with *Rose Princess*, I had the DVDs brought over from Japan when they were released and had put them in the self-study area-cum-library so students could watch them. The students were naturally still having some trouble with their Japanese listening skills, but because they were already familiar with the story from the manga, they were still able to enjoy the show.

"This DVD? What about it?"

"Zero is the protagonist, isn't he?!" the dwarf girl said with a snort.

As I mentioned, the character named Zero is right there in the title, and the story does start when the boy gets his powers and takes on that name. That would normally lead one to think that he was the protagonist. But...

"What are you talking about?!" the elf girl demanded, arching her beautiful eyebrows angrily. "Seiryuu is the main character, and you know it! He's a military man working for the good of his country, trying to change the world from the inside out! He's the classic ally of justice! He's the true hero!"

"Ah," I sighed.

As the elf said, from an outsider's perspective, the boy with the mysterious power definitely came across as the villain. Zero's character design used a lot of reds and blacks in a way that made him look kind of menacing. He definitely seemed more like a Demon King or last-boss type.

Then there was the little matter of his trying to take over the world. In his fight against a major nation, Zero wasn't afraid to use people for his own ends, any time he needed to. He was willing to try any stratagem, any trick. There was an element of guerrilla tactics to how he fought, but some viewers might consider his methods brutal.

On that point, Zero's rival Seiryuu was a model of uprightness, serious and dedicated and the consummate main character. Given how passionate

the elf girl obviously felt, it was hard not to sympathize.

"No matter how you look at it, Zero is obviously the villain!" the elf said.

"Is not! He's just following his own vision of justice!"

Each of the girls was so invested in her own favorite character that she felt compelled to reject the other's choice. It was an all too common occurrence in the otaku world: in order to elevate your own favorite, you tried to tear down other characters, especially those who were rivals to your choice.

"O-Okay," I said, "let's all calm down..."

"Sensei! Who do *you* think is the hero?!"

Two pairs of very sharp eyes fixed on me, and I found myself lost for words.

Dark Knights was actually the subject of similar debate in Japan, where people had seized upon the parts of it that were a little different from run-of-the-mill anime. People had gotten a little tired of simple, clear-cut stories, so when something like *Dark Knights* came along, something with a more nuanced presentation, people got hooked on it. (Another fairly common occurrence.)

But exactly because it was a little different from average, it was impossible to bring the same judgment to bear as you might on other works.

"Uhhh..." I fretted about it for a moment, then finally, unable to come up with a good answer, I just smiled ambiguously. "Either one is fine, right?"

"What does that even mean?!

"There has to be a main character, doesn't there?!"

"No, no, no," I said, shaking my head. "I don't think it matters so much who the main character is, as which character you care most about."

It was true that the story took Zero and Seiryuu as its protagonists, but the point of view in the anime wasn't limited to these two. Both Zero and Seiryuu were depicted as impossibly handsome geniuses who could also handle themselves in a fight—in short, comically overpowered characters. Because of that, I just couldn't get into them. My favorite character from that series was actually someone else entirely.

And so I said: "If it seems like there are several main characters, I think that just means that you can enjoy the story from any of a variety of angles depending on how you watch it. Maybe instead of arguing about who the

main character is, you could talk about what kind of enjoyment you got from watching the show the way you did. Then you can both discover new perspectives, and the whole experience can be more meaningful."

Both girls looked at me in complete silence.

Huh! Maybe I actually managed to teach them something.

Neither of them looked entirely pleased, as if in their heart of hearts, they didn't really buy what I was saying. But either way, the fighting had stopped for the moment, and I decided I was just going to have to be satisfied with that.

"You know, I saw that anime."

The words came from an unexpected source: Hikaru-san. She had wandered over to us and took the DVD case from the dwarf girl, running her fingers gently over the cover. Even that small gesture seemed strangely alluring, and my back prickled as if her fingers were caressing my skin instead of a plastic case. But, er, that's really neither here nor there right now.

"Zero and Seiryuu," she mused, letting her gaze play over the two characters on the cover. "If the question is whose perspective the anime takes more often, I would have to say it's Zero by a small margin."

"There, see!" the dwarf girl said triumphantly. The elf looked less than thrilled.

But then Hikaru-san went on. "But isn't it a little hasty to assume that simply because a story is told from a certain character's perspective that that character is the protagonist?"

She smiled at the girls, almost indulgently.

"Do the both of you know that *Order of the Dark Knights: Zero's Revenge* was originally planned with Seiryuu as the protagonist?"

The girls goggled.

"R-Really?"

"Yes. But in Japan right now, stories featuring antiheroes—characters with a bit of a dark side to them, like Zero—just happen to be popular. So they changed the story to be told from Zero's perspective so that people who like those sorts of shows could enjoy it. Or so I've heard."

The students both looked thoroughly perplexed. And why shouldn't they? Hikaru-san was talking about behind-the-scenes stuff, the concerns of the production committee. You might argue that, to the extent the

information was never divulged to the viewing public, it wasn't really relevant to the enjoyment of the work, but at the same time it was indispensable.

The girls had been talking about *Dark Knights* purely in terms of its content, and they had just been hit with a completely separate dimension of the show. Anyway, the more you liked a show, the more you wanted to know every little thing about it—and we otaku definitely ate up behind-the-scenes secrets like that.

"Furthermore," Hikaru-san said, looking at the elf, "as a matter of fact, there was a manga written primarily from Seiryuu's point of view."

"Huh? Th-There was?!"

"It must mean more than a few fans felt the way you do."

The elf girl's face brightened immediately.

"If I may go on, there was also a manga that focused on Zero's little sister, as well as a novelization that took yet another perspective. If point of view determines who the main character is, then Seiryuu is the main character, but so is the little sister."

"We get it now...!" The girls nodded enthusiastically.

.....Wait a second.

Had Hikaru-san really said anything that different from what I had?

For some reason, it hadn't really sunk in with the girls when I said it. Did this just go to show how much the mode of explanation mattered? Or was it something more than that?

"In the end, it doesn't matter who the protagonist is," Hikaru-san said suddenly. "The fact that you're arguing about it merely proves you're still young and inexperienced."

"B-But—"

"For if they are both main characters," Hikaru-san proclaimed, linking hands with the elf and the dwarf, "does that not mean you can ship them both?"

Ooh! Very powerf—wait, *what*?

"When it comes to top and bottom, it matters not who the main character is," Hikaru-san declared, holding the DVD case aloft as if it were some kind of holy book. "Because the two are also one!"

"Ahh!" The elf and dwarf, who had been fighting a moment ago, now raised their voices in unison. Around us, other students who had been

tensely watching this exchange swallowed in relief. A general murmur of appreciation broke out—especially among the girls.

"*You're* a fujoshi, too?!" I exclaimed. I didn't think I could take another "rotten woman" around me. It was bad enough with Minori-san constantly trying to get me and Garius to "be friends." I already couldn't take my eyes off her.

"Zero/Seiryuu would be great!"

"I think you mean Seiryuu/Zero!"

"Excuse me? Mob slash Zero *slash Seiryuu*!"

"N-No one's ever done that before!"

The girls had summarily ignored my concerns and turned quickly to the question of the best BL pairings.

.....Before I knew what was happening, I found Minori-san in there with them. And so an argument about who the main character was had transformed into a bubbly conference about who would be most moe with whom, involving most of the girls in the school.

Do you really like BL that much? Are you all *addicts?*

".....Errr..... So, uh, glad that worked out."

I wasn't about to let myself get sucked into a discussion about boys' love shippings. I tried to put some space between myself and the animated discussions in which Minori-san and Hikaru-san were featuring.

Now a safe distance away, I watched them for a moment, and finally I understood.

Hikaru-san wasn't just blending in. Almost from the moment she arrived, she had become the center of conversation. There are a lot of otaku, myself included, who can't tell what other people are thinking to save their lives, or who otherwise have some kind of difficulty communicating. Hikaru-san, however, was completely different.

"Assistant, huh?"

I had a thought. Between her background and the fact that Matoba-san had brought her here, it made sense to think that Ayasaki Hikaru was another of Japan's chosen "otaku missionaries," like me.

"But maybe..."

If it had been Hikaru-san, and not me, who had come here first and been the general manager of Amutech, I wonder how things would have turned out.

Not that there was any benefit in getting lost in counterfactuals. It just sort of nagged at me.

After that, class went well enough that day, with no special problems. Hikaru-san's introduction to the classroom could be considered a qualified success. The whole thing with the *Order of the Dark Knights* seemed to have led the students to accept Hikaru-san as the same sort of person as me. During class, she mostly sat in a corner of the classroom and observed what Minori-san and I did, but during break, I saw her chatting amiably with the students.

And so day turned to evening.

A bird-drawn carriage collected me, Minori-san, and Hikaru-san, and we came back to the mansion.

"Welcome home," Myusel said, greeting us in the foyer. Incidentally, she also sometimes acted as a Japanese language teacher at the school, but having her there every day would have interfered with her maid work. So she often stayed at the mansion, as she had today. "I'm sure you've all worked hard today."

"Thanks. Everything good here at home?"

"Yes, sir. Oh, that's right—those nayal berries you like so much arrived from the market today. I'll be pairing them with duck in a paté for dinner tonight."

"Ooh, those are tasty. I mean, your cooking is always great, but I especially like that paté. Maybe it's the nayal berries."

"It's weird," Minori-san said. "They taste like avocado, even though they're a completely different color."

"Avocados are something of a strange food to begin with," Hikaru-san replied. "I've heard they're sometimes called the 'butter of the forest.'"

Thus Myusel, Minori-san, and I went about with our usual easy conversation, now with Hikaru-san joining in, as we walked down the halls of the mansion.

"Brooke-san, Cerise-san," Myusel suddenly whispered. And indeed, I could see Brooke and Cerise walking together down the hallway. They

seemed to have noticed us, because both of them stopped, looked in our direction, and bowed their heads.

"Welcome back, Master."

"Thanks," I said.

As we exchanged these routine greetings, I noticed: Brooke was carrying some sort of bag. At first I thought maybe it was the trash, but then I realized that both Brooke, who was our gardener, and Cerise, who was a maid, had identical bags.

"What have you got there?"

"This? Er, it's..." Cerise trailed off, sounding hesitant.

Brooke answered instead, scratching his cheek with one rough, clawed finger. "These are our scales."

"Scales...?"

"Yessir. New ones are coming in." He gave the bag a gentle shake. It made a rustling sound, like a bag of potato chips. "Left to their own devices, they'd just drop everywhere. So instead we pull out the loose ones and throw them away."

"Ahh," I said, nodding. "It's like when you brush out an animal's summer or winter coat."

As I recalled, when a house was home to an animal that changed coats between seasons, you didn't just wait for the for it to fall out; you went ahead and brushed the animal to get out loose fur. That kept the hair from getting all over the house.

Come to think of it, Elvia had mentioned that her fur got thicker during her "phase" or whatever. I wondered what she did. The thing was, questions about someone's body could so easily be taken the wrong way, so it wasn't something you could just ask about.

"Don't you also shed your entire skin at once? Is this different?"

"Yes, it is..." Cerise said. A certain shyness kept her from speaking. It seemed that among lizardmen, the coming in of new scales wasn't considered a decent topic of conversation.

"Shedding involves the entire skin at once, so there's nothing to scatter everywhere."

Boy, lizardmen really were different from the rest of us, biologically as well as culturally. Then again, as strange as they might look to us, Brooke and his friends probably thought that humans were the weird ones.

“If you’ll pardon us, we’ll just go and get rid of these.”

Brooke and Cerise were about to walk off again when a voice said, “Um...”

It was Hikaru-san.

“Could I perhaps... see them?”

“Ahem? See what?”

“Your scales.”

“You wish to... see them?”

Brooke and Cerise looked at each other. I was no expert at reading lizardman expressions, but I had to figure they looked shocked right about then. They shared a moment of reluctance, but then...

“Yes... Very well.”

They couldn’t really refuse Hikaru-san’s request. As a visitor from Japan, Hikaru-san was in the same sort of position as I was, treated like a noble here in Eldant. From Brooke and Cerise’s perspective, a little embarrassment was no reason to refuse her what she wanted.

“Here you are,” they said after a moment, and each of them opened the bags and held them out.

Inside, there really were dozens and dozens of scales about the size of the fingernail on my pinky. I wasn’t usually too conscious of Brooke and Cerise as having scales as such, but when I took a close look, I could make out the fine pattern of the covering on their bodies.

Thinking about the whole process as being akin to an animal shedding its fur had left me with a less than great impression, but up close, I found the scales partially transparent and surprisingly beautiful.

Hikaru-san must have had the same reaction, because she said, “Are you really going to throw these away?”

“Er, yes.”

“If you’re just going to get rid of them anyway, would you consider giving them to me?”

“I—I’m sorry?!” Brooke’s voice seemed to have uncharacteristically gone up an octave. “B-But that’s—”

“Is it a bad thing?” Hikaru-san asked, tilting her head.

“N-No, not exactly, but they’re... they’re *scales*,” Cerise answered, equally confounded.

I had rarely seen the lizardman couple so taken aback. They hardly

changed their behavior when slightly surprised—so the way they were acting now must have represented absolute and utter shock.

"But—" Hikaru-san plunged a hand into Cerise's bag without hesitation, coming up with a scale that twinkled in the light of an oil lamp. "These look like they would make excellent earrings, or necklaces or something."

"Oh, I get it," Minori-san said, nodding.

Now I remembered: she was a "layer," too. Cosplayers made clothing, sure, but people who were really into it often made their own accessories, too. The fictional costumes they were recreating, though, frequently included stuff like jewels or dragon claws—things that either didn't exist in modern Japan or, if they did, were prohibitively expensive. So plastic figured heavily, as did recycled parts from whatever the cosplayers thought might fit. Serious hobbyists were always on the lookout for anything that might work for their costumes.

Minori-san was dedicated to playing male characters, so I guessed she wouldn't be that keen on earrings or necklaces or other feminine accessories.

"But they, er... don't disgust you?" Brooke asked hesitantly.

"Why would they?" Hikaru-san asked.

"You don't feel they're... dirty?"

"I can wash and polish them."

"You honored humans would normally feel sick at the thought of wearing lizardman scales, I should think."

"Ahh. Is that how things are here? What a waste," Hikaru-san said assertively. "It doesn't make me feel at all sick to think of wearing your scales. Perhaps some people have an instinctive aversion to wearing something that came from someone else's body—but consider wigs, which were once made of real human hair."

"Uh..."

"What's beautiful is beautiful. That's all I'm interested in."

"You... think they're beautiful?"

"Yes. Very." She reached into Brooke's bag this time, took out another scale, and placed it in her palm alongside the one from Cerise. "Each of you has slightly different color scales, don't you? Pairing them like this brings out the contrast, and I think it's wonderful. If I polished them, I'll bet they'd be even prettier. If I'm careful about which ones I use, I think I could make

something truly amazing."

Brooke and Cerise were dead silent. They had to be completely shocked.

"Shinichi-san, Minori-san, don't you agree?" Hikaru-san said, looking in our direction.

"Yeah. You're right. I think you're on to something." I nodded.

Just like Hikaru-san had said, wigs used to straight up use human hair. In fact, I had heard about a short story from another country called "The Gift of the Magi," in which a woman cuts off and sells her luxurious hair in order to buy a watch fob for her husband. Come to think of it, even today, some people have the ashes of deceased loved ones turned into diamonds that they then use to make accessories. And that's just human bodies. Think about leather—that used to be part of a living thing. Or silk, which comes from silkworms.

Sensibilities about this sort of thing probably weren't so different between Japan and the Eldant Empire. That being the case, the perception here that lizardman scales were dirty or sickening probably sprang from the racism that was already present. And unfortunately, everyone in this world took those attitudes as given.

So it was that an idea like this could only have come from someone from a completely different world—someone like one of us. And given how important it was to me to minimize status differences, I couldn't help but agree.

"You see? If you're only going to throw them away anyway, I'd like you to give them to me."

Brooke and Cerise still appeared dubious, but at length they looked in my direction—and when I nodded, they slowly and uncertainly closed the bags and held them out to Hikaru-san.

"You're quite sure about this...?"

"Yes, absolutely," Hikaru-san said, smiling.

"Thank you very much." The words came not from Hikaru-san, but from Cerise, who bowed her head as if to emphasize the point.

"Why should you thank me, Cerise-san?" Hikaru-san said, still smiling.

"This is the first time any human has called our scales beautiful."

"That isn't anything deserving of thanks. I simply said what I thought." Holding the bags and looking quite pleased, Hikaru-san tilted her head again. "Don't you think the two colors together, along with some lace or

beads, would make a lovely bracelet?" She was asking Minori-san.

"Yeah, I think you could pull that off."

"I'm going to try it right away. Tonight."

"Tonight? Did you bring lace with you?"

"Yes. I have a few store-bought accessories too, but I so like handmade. I brought plenty of clothes as well."

"Oh, that reminds me," said Myusel, who had been quiet until that moment. "I'm very sorry that I forgot to tell you. A great deal of luggage was delivered from Japan to Hikaru-sama's room. The Jay-Ess-Dee-Eff person who delivered it told me I could open and organize it. I only took out the things I recognized and hung the clothes so they wouldn't wrinkle... Er, I hope that was all right."

"Of course it was. Thank you very much," Hikaru-san said.

"Er, ahh..."

Myusel wriggled slightly and waved her hand in front of her face. It meant there was something she wanted to say or ask, but couldn't quite bring herself to do so.

"What's up, Myusel?" Minori-san said.

"Um... About Hikaru-sama's luggage... There were a lot of adorable Western-style outfits."

"You think so? Thank you."

"Do they... all belong to you?"

"I made more than half of them myself."

"That's amazing. I was so surprised when I saw Minori-sama making the costumes for our moo-vee. But Hikaru-sama, your dresses are so detailed, like something the nobility might wear..."

Gothic-Loli, with all its frills and lace, was definitely not a kind of costume we had created for the movie, and it was a very labor-intensive style. I could understand how Myusel might see it as some kind of elevated fashion for important people.

"It's manageable, as long as you have a sewing machine and some other helpful tools." Hikaru-san paused, then clapped her hands as if she had just thought of something. "Say, Myusel-san."

"Y-Yes?" The maid blinked at suddenly being addressed like this.

"Would you like to try on my clothes?"

"Huh?!"

“I had a similar conversation with the students at school. I think the size would be just about right for you. I’m sure it would look great. What do you think?”

“I... I don’t know what to say... Wh-Why should I ever presume to...”

Myusel couldn’t hide her astonishment at the sudden proposition; she shook her head vigorously. Hikaru-san, however, seemed to have gotten the idea into her head and was not planning to let it go. Instead, she turned to me and Minori-san for support.

“Minori-san. Don’t you think this would look wonderful on Myusel-san?”

“I absolutely do!” Minori-san answered immediately—she even clenched her fist for good measure.

“And what about you, Shinichi-san?”

I was silent for a long moment, picturing a Gothic-Loli Myusel in my mind’s eye.

That dress, all that black lace... Her usual sweet maid’s smile replaced by a devilish grin, looking at me...

“...Yes.”

Yikes. Nosebleed danger: high!

“See? Even Shinichi-san says so.”

“W-Well, in that case... um... if you wouldn’t mind...”

Myusel was clearly backed into a corner here—she still looked hesitant, but nodded ambivalently.

“Come to my room later then, please. Oh—and since we’re taking the time anyway, bring Elvia-san, too.”

“Elvia, too?”

Myusel was one thing, but this was a bit surprising. Elvia didn’t strike me as the type who would normally be interested in wearing a dress. Maybe overalls or hot pants or something. Or, you know, something more boyish.

“She’s quite an interesting piece of material herself. I’d love to try some things on her,” Hikaru-san said.

“Uh...huh...”

So that was it.

“Later, then,” Hikaru-san said and bowed, then went trotting off.

As we watched her go, Myusel said, “Are... Are you really sure it’s all right...?” She was definitely still concerned.

“Well, the person who owns the clothes says it’s okay, so why not?” Minori-san said, trying to sound upbeat. “And Shinichi-kun said he wants to see you in that dress, didn’t he? Goth-Loli Myusel!”

“Ah...”

Myusel glanced at me—and then immediately blushed and looked at the ground.

Ahhh! What’s with that unbelievably sweet, shy gesture?! When a beautiful girl like Myusel does that to me—does that to me—I just—I aggghhhh!

“I—I’ll go call Elvia-san...”

Myusel put her hands to her cheeks to try to hide her blush, then walked off down the hallway. Oh! What a model of maidenly modesty. Granted, it was a perfectly normal cue for two-dimensional girls. But to see it in real life! I never imagined. I’ll never wash these eyes again.

“Oooh, someone’s in loooove!” Minori-san said as she watched me watch Myusel leave.

“You know who else fixates about who’s in love, Minori-san? Old dudes.”

This attempt at a comeback was the best thing I could think of to hide my own embarrassment.

And so, about half an hour later...

“Um... Wh—What do you think...?”

“Do y’ like the way it looks...?”

Two startlingly beautiful, but hesitant, women appeared in the living area.

Of course, I’m referring to Myusel and Elvia. Except...

“Whoa...” I couldn’t hold back a gasp of admiration. They looked so different from usual that just for a second, I hadn’t known who they were.

They had just changed their clothes and hair, but still, they looked like completely different people.

“Um... Master...?” Myusel, who usually wore her hair in twintails or a ponytail, had a black lace ribbon around her head now. She was wearing a

white blouse with plenty of frills. There was layer upon layer of black lace on her skirt, which stopped above the knees. Finally, she was wearing knee socks and black heels.

“Normal Myusel” is awful cute, but her beauty in this outfit radiated a nobility that made her seem almost like some princess. This wasn’t about just getting gussied up with a little makeup; it suggested that she had a fundamental beauty.

“Sh-Shinichi-sama...?

Elvia, on the other hand, was wearing a black headdress woven into her hair. Her sleeves as well as the space from her neck down to just above her chest had been covered in a translucent black material, so that the cleft of her breasts was just visible. I’m a little ashamed to say I couldn’t look away from that feature, but... it was an unstoppable force! An immovable object! The material was translucent—practically begging me to look!

Anyway, her skirt had a butterfly pattern on it and was hemmed with white lace. On her feet was a pair of black boots.

It was nothing like her usual "wild child" appearance. There was a certain harmoniousness to her body (maybe there was a corset at work?), and she seemed unusually sexy. It contrasted with the ambivalent expression on her face to make the effect even more pronounced.

The heck? This is awesome.

In just thirty minutes, the two of them had changed completely—was this magic?!

"I think both of you look absolutely adorable—or maybe I should say beautiful!" I exclaimed, clenching my fist.

Myusel and Elvia fidgeted shyly—and that only made my heart pound harder. Even though they were both girls, Minori-san seemed to be having the same reaction.

"You look fantastic! Can I take a photo?!" She grabbed her phone out of her pocket, and without waiting for an answer she rushed over and started snapping away. "Okay, look this way, please. Great! Perfect! Now, pose!"

"Er—yes?"

"Right hand like this! Head tilted, like so!"

Myusel's head was obviously spinning as Minori-san started arranging her with all the gusto of a professional photographer. She seemed like such an experienced hand that I half expected her to say, "Okay, next, let's get that top off!" (Yeah, sure.)

Standing beside Myusel, Elvia clasped her hands to her chest and exclaimed, "It's... It's like I've gone and turned into a noble or somethin'!"

"I think nobles tend to have more refined diction," I said, laughing.

It was like I had noticed with Myusel: Elvia seemed to associate lots of lace with nobility. I guess if you don't have a sewing machine, attaching this many frills to something would take a lot of time-consuming hand labor.

"Did you notice they're both wearing makeup?" Hikaru-san asked, coming into the room a bit belatedly.

"Oh! So they are," Minori-san said, pausing her hand on the shutter long enough to add, "It completely slipped past me."

Hello? You're a girl, too. This is supposed to be your department...

"Pink for Myusel-san, a bit of brown eyeshadow for Elvia-san. Both of

them have such lovely skin, it works so well for them."

"It's easy to overdo pink and make it look like a bruise, but it's really perfect for Myusel," Minori-san said.

"Both of them have pink on their cheeks."

"That's great! Oh, but do you think orange might have worked on Elvia?"

I *think* they were talking about makeup... but unfortunately, I couldn't be sure. I wished I had something to add, but it was all girl talk at that point, not a conversation I could easily join.

At length I even started to wonder if I should really be there. I looked around the room, whereupon I spotted Brooke and Cerise standing by the wall. They were staring on, not appearing to understand Minori-san and Hikaru-san's conversation any better than I did. Maybe lizardmen had a different standard of aesthetics than humans. Brooke, being a guy, probably doubly didn't understand.

"Oh, Brooke-san, Cerise-san," Hikaru-san said, turning to them. "Let me know when you're getting rid of your scales again. They're really a wonderful material. I'm going to be considering what kind of design to use them for."

"Hm! If our scales be good enough for you," Brooke answered.

"It will please us greatly if you find a use for them," Cerise said. "Won't it, Brooke?"

"If you wish, we can produce more scales than usual. We would be happy to see you enjoy them."

"Indeed we would!"

"Gladly," Hikaru-san said, and just like that, she had drawn them both into the conversation. Just like she had done at the school that morning, she really seemed to know how to shorten the distance between people.

Happy voices rang throughout the living area. It seemed to get more and more cheery by the moment.

Everyone was enjoying themselves. But me?

I didn't know why, but it seemed like I had missed my chance to get in on the conversation. In the end, I just hung out by the wall, watching everyone else have a good time.

After dinner, I jumped in the bath.

“Ahhh...”

Back when I was a home security guard, I often did little more than rinse off with a shower, but I had to admit, there was nothing like sinking deep into a bathtub, letting the water wash away all your tension and fatigue.

“This is paradise,” I murmured, practically compelled to use a cliché. My words echoed around the large bathing area.

I had used this bath more times than I could count, so it was pretty much normal to me now, but the very first time I had seen it, I thought I had wandered into the main bath at some hot-springs resort. There were scads of decorations on the walls and ceiling, and the hot water gushed out of the mouth of a lion—er, almost. More like some kind of wolf-like creature.

As a side note, there obviously was no electric pump to keep that water flowing, and there wasn’t a spring nearby. When, out of curiosity, I looked into it, I discovered that Brooke was heating a bunch of water and then moving it with a hand pump or something. So that was why he had wanted me to let him know when I was going to take a bath.

I felt bad about it and told him he didn’t have to do that for me, but apparently it was part of keeping the bathwater at a stable temperature, so the water had to keep flowing.

“Nghaa...”

I felt so good, I found my voice turning a little weird. I like it this way: almost but not quite too hot. The constant changing of the water helped keep the temperature just the way I liked it. I didn’t know who had designed this bath, but I was very grateful to them, and to Brooke.

I put my washcloth on my head and sank into the water with a sigh (another cliché). Then I rested against the side of the tub, stretching out my arms and legs.

I sat there in silence. As I stared up at the ceiling, the events of the day kept replaying in my head. I was thrilled that Hikaru-san had integrated into the school so extraordinarily well. It was easy on me because I didn’t have to go out of my way to help her fit in, and above all, it made me genuinely happy to see the students have fun.

But I couldn't deny that, for whatever reason, there was a little part of me that felt like it didn't quite jibe. Almost like it was unbearable.

Yet another woman in the house meant yet more subjects a man couldn't broach. Sure, I had Brooke, but he wasn't exactly a proactive conversation-starter, and anyway, the difference between the sexes seemed subtly different for lizardmen than for humans. I had a sneaking suspicion that even if I'd wanted to commiserate with him about being the only men in a house full of women, it wouldn't have gone very well.

I know it might have been more normal in this situation to be thinking to myself, *Is this my own personal harem?* or *Did I just land in some sort of gal game?* But even though I knew that intellectually, I couldn't help but be stung by the feeling that I was being excluded from the circle of my own friends.

Then again, maybe all this stuff was just in my own head.

"Go away, bad thoughts!" I shook my head, trying to break the increasingly vicious downward spiral I was slipping into.

You're just overthinking things.

It was a bad habit of mine. Looking back on it, even the entire incident that had caused me to become a home security guard in the first place—being rejected by my childhood friend—if, instead of shutting myself up in my room, I had just put the whole thing out of my mind and continued going to school, I probably would have had a perfectly normal school life.

As it happened, of course, it was precisely that stint as a home security guard that had set me on the path to coming to this other world, meeting Myusel and Petralka and Elvia and Brooke and everyone else here—so I guess you could say things worked out in the end.

"Hmm..."

I swallowed an oncoming sigh, sinking into the tub up to my chin. The only sound in the entire bathing area was the water pouring from the wolf's mouth.

Brooke, as I said, was the one heating the water and working the pump, so we never had a chance to bathe together. And obviously, none of the girls were going to join me in here, so I always found myself alone in the bath.

It didn't usually bother me, but somehow I found the huge, empty space made me feel, well, lonely.

I glanced toward the door of the bathing area.

If this were a manga or something, this was the moment when the beautiful girl characters, not realizing that the protagonist was in the bath, would wander in and he would get a lucky peep. You know? When I looked at the door, it's not as if I were seriously expecting anything like that. Besides, my clothes were sitting right there in the changing room. No one could miss them.

But then...

"Huh...?"

There was a sound on the far side of the door. I furrowed my brow in confusion.

Was someone in the changing room? It wouldn't be that weird; it was possible it was Myusel or Cerise bringing me a change of clothes. But if that was the case... then why was the door opening?

The door was opening?!

I sat, frozen and astonished, in the tub as the door slid open with a rattle.

"Shinichi-san?"

"Hi-Hika...gh..."

I almost choked on her name. It was so sudden, I didn't have time to hide myself—or for that matter, to think, *Oh yeah, I'm in the water, so everything below my neck probably isn't exactly visible*. All I could do was stare, my mouth hanging open stupidly, at the person who had just come in.

It was Hikaru-san (as if you needed me to tell you that). She had wrapped herself in a towel, sure, but the pale legs below the hem of the towel, as well as her equally pale and exposed neck, shoulders, and arms, were all too visible.

It was a reminder that being partially hidden is even sexier than being completely naked. To hide something is the same as saying you would be embarrassed for it to be seen, or in other words, to announce precisely that there's something there to be embarrassed about, or in other words again, that there's a secret garden right here, just one thin towel away, inviting the imagination to rise up and—rise up—grraagghhhkk (Shinichi is currently experiencing technical difficulties. Please stand by.)

"I-I-I-I-I'm in here right now!" I finally stammered out. "I'm s-sorry if you didn't realize that!" I turned my back to her as I spoke. I didn't exactly count, but I would guess it took me about ten seconds to get around to doing this. During that time, I had an unimpeded view of Hikaru-san and

her pale skin. The standard thing would be for her to scream “Pervert!” and throw a bucket or two at my head.

But Hikaru-san didn’t say anything.

I found that even more intimidating, and it made me start babbling. “I j-just, you know? I can’t qu-quite get out of the bath right now, so—!” I was in a bad place. “S-So, just, you know—”

“In that case, let’s bathe together.”

“Exactly! So let’s j-just bathe to—ggghhaa?!”

Whaaat?! What’s with this crazy plot twist?!

Could it be, O God, that the path to a real and fulfilling life with a woman has finally opened to me?! Do you want me to explode?! I think it’s too early to get torn to pieces! Ahh, Father, Mother, your son Kanou Shinichi this day abandons his dream of becoming a wizard...!

My ridiculous imagination was, as usual, going a mile a minute.

“B-B-BBBBBut w-w-wait...!”

I’m sorry to tell you this, God, but I just don’t have the nerve. Offered the chance to bathe with a beautiful woman, I don’t have it in me to be all, *Well, it would be a shame to waste an opportunity when it comes knocking, ho ho ho!*

I didn’t say anything. Then I heard a soft splish from behind me. I had to assume it was Hikaru-san getting into the bath. The skin on my back seemed immensely sensitive all of a sudden; I thought I could feel her getting closer.

“U-Um, uh, Hikaru-san...sa...n...”

I could tell: she was right there. Right... behind me...

Ahh! Why does my extrasensory perception seem so acute at these moments and only these moments?!

My heart was pounding wildly; I didn’t know if it was from the heat or the excitement.

I mustn’t stand up I mustn’t stand up I mustn’t stand up I mustn’t stand up I mustn’t stand up I mustn’t stand up I mustn’t stand up I mustn’t stand up I mustn’t stand up I mustn’t stand up I mustn’t stand up don’t ask what I mean you know what I mean!!

“U—Um...!”

Desperately fighting the urge to glance back one more time, I forced my eyes shut.

“Er, uh, would you maybe be so kind as to get out again? No, er, or, maybe you could honorably look away and I could... humbly... get out...”

Nervousness seemed to have inspired an abundance of politeness in me for some reason. I could almost hear my shoulder devil mocking me: “C’mon, turn around! She said you could!”

“No!” responded my good angel. “Don’t do it. You’re a better man than that, Shinichi-sama!”

Wait a second, I could understand why my shoulder devil had my face, but why did my angel look like Myusel?

“Are you unhappy to be here with me?”

“I—I wouldn’t say... I mean...”

I’m not unhappy about it—that’s exactly the problem!

If this was an all-too-obvious plot twist, then I knew what came next: I would turn around, thrilled by this opportunity, at which point somebody else—another one of the women, no doubt—would come bursting in, just in time to find me in what appeared to be a compromising situation that I would never be able to talk my way out of. I might be able to survive if the witness were Minori-san or Cerise, or even Elvia, but if poor, serious Myusel were to see this, if she were to think worse of me because of it—I don’t think I would recover for at least five years.

But then...

“It’s all right.”

I could feel ripples coming closer. There couldn’t be more than a meter between me and Hikaru-san now. The fact that her voice seemed to come from slightly above me implied that she was standing in the water rather than submerged.

Meaning that if I were to turn around now, I would be, er, staring right at the lower half of her body, and there was no way she would still be wearing her towel in the bath, meaning, uh, her mysterious Bermuda Triangle would, it would be right in front of— it would be right— gaahhhgk (Please stand by.)

“Or are you more excited by naked members of the same sex, Shinichi-san?”

“No, even I don’t get excited by naked—.....”

.....Come again?

What was that? *Pardon moi?*

In my complete and utter confusion... I unthinkingly turned around.

The first thing I saw was Hikaru-san's devilish little smile.

Below that was a chest as flat and tranquil as the sea, then a belly button sitting smack amidst a smooth, pale abdomen, and below *that*...

"....."

Well, I mean, it was definitely... It was very, distinctly noticeably...

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!"

The echo of my shout bounced all around the bathing area.

"Wha— Wha-wha-wha-whaaa..."

I stood bolt upright in spite of myself.

"You don't have to act so shocked," Hikaru-san said, looking a bit annoyed.

"Y-Yeah, but—I mean—b-b-b-b-but...!"

"But what?"

"You're a m-m-m-m-man?"

"Yes. So?" She—he?—seemed to wonder what all the fuss was about.

Argh! How can you act so cool and like this is all just perfectly normal?!

"But— Your clothes— The Suiren outfit—"

"It's cosplay. It's not that unusual, is it?"

Hikaru-san smiled without a hint of malice.

O-Okay. Calm down, Kanou Shinichi. Calm down and count your prime numbers—I mean, take stock of the situation!

A man? Who? Hikaru-san? A man?! Cosplay?! Dressing as a girl?!

I caught my breath: something like a flash of inspiration hit me.

I remembered what Garius had said:

"...Wonderful."

"Shinichi."

"You could learn something from her..."

Could Garius possibly have known at a glance that Hikaru-san was actually a guy?!

So when he told me to "learn from" Hikaru-san, had he meant... whoa, whoa, wait a second!

My imagination was headed to some dangerous places. I hate the way my otaku self only seems to have a really powerful creative streak at times

like this.

To compound the situation...

“Shinichi-sama?!”

They must have been able to hear my scream in the rest of the house, because who should come charging into the bathing area but Myusel?

Oh yeah. I’d forgotten how sharp elf hearing is... Wait, trivia like that doesn’t matter right now!

“What in the world ha—”

“Er...”

Time stood still.

I was just standing up in the bath—in other words, I was looking right at Myusel, and all the important bits were plainly visible.

Hikaru-san was also standing there, facing away from the maid.

And then there was Myusel, staring straight at me, eyes wide.

For an instant, nobody moved a muscle—but Myusel’s face turned red about as quick as was possible.

“Er, uh, um, Myusel—san?”

“I’m..... very, very, very s-sorry!” Myusel stuttered, then squeezed her eyes shut, turn around, and started to dash—

“Eep?!”

—straight into the wall of the changing room.

“Hey, M-Myusel!” Panicked, I jumped out of the bath and ran over to her. It must have been a pretty good clonk—or maybe she was just overwhelmed by what she’d seen. In any event, she was out cold. Except she kept muttering “I’m very sorry, I’m very sorry,” like a mantra. What propriety.

No! That’s not the point!

“Is—Is she okay?” I muttered, looking closely at her face.

And that was when...

“What happened?”

“Whatsa matter?”

“What’s wrong?”

...as it just so happened, the rest of the women showed up.

“Ah...”

I froze.

I realized that this was an even less explain-awayable situation than the

one I had appeared to be in a minute ago.

There was Myusel, sprawled on the ground and out like a light.

There was me, buck naked and hovering over her.

.....

What did I do to deserve this downward spiral?!

“Shinichi-kun?” Minori-san crouched in front of me, grinning. That was a grown-up for you—the nakedness of some punk kid didn’t move her at all.

That was all well and good, but—ahh! That posture emphasized Minori-san’s softness and her jiggliness and why now of all times was she only wearing an old T-shirt, and—just a second, was it possible she was going bra-less? Not the point! My you-know-what was getting harder and harder to explain...!

“Uh... This is all a big m-misunderstanding...” I knew it was futile, but I had to say something.

Minori-san nodded as if to say I didn’t have to go on.

“Believe me, you don’t have to explain anything. ♪”

“*Of course* you’d say thaaaaaat!”

That was when Minori-san put a serious joint lock on me. Of course she did. It was in the script.

Chapter Two: A Trading-Card Strategy?

The girl looked as if she had been incarnated from the darkness itself.

She simply appeared, there in the black—her hair long and dark as pitch, the hem of her dress, which was covered in frills and lace, billowing as she approached. She wasn't walking, either; much less running or jumping. She simply stood there and seemed to grow bigger and bigger. It was a weird feeling, as if the distance were shrinking itself. As I watched her stupidly, she got closer and closer until we were practically breathing on each other.

"Ah..." A trembling sound escaped my lips.

I stood frozen, with no idea what to do—when she poked me in the chest.

It caused me to collapse to my knees, then fall flat on my back, and then she was bending silently over me, ever closer. There was no light anywhere, yet for some reason I could easily see her pale face, her smile.

"*This* time, the ritual of the contract shall be done..."

In contrast to her solemn pronouncement, I noticed that she was blushing like a shy little girl. Meanwhile, all I could do was quiver. Our eyes met—and she furrowed her eyebrows as if in embarrassment, bit her delicate, pink lip like she was fighting something back.

"In order to manifest the vow between light and darkness here and now..."

She unceremoniously mounted me. Her thighs, which I could see peeking out from under the lace-fringed hem of her dark skirt, seemed impossibly bright in the darkness. I could feel the heat of her body through her clothes, proving to me that she was no illusion, but a being of flesh and blood.

"The door of destiny will now open..."

She reached out for me, pulling at my shirt, her slim, white fingers brushing my skin.

Ahh... I trembled at the thought of what was to come.

I was as helpless as a sparrow now, unable to do anything in the face of

this girl. I couldn't move a muscle, as if the very root of my existence had been entrapped. I was totally at her mercy.

Of course, the two of us were all alone in the darkness. There was nobody who might come and stop her.

"The pact of blood washes all things..."

Or at least, I hadn't thought there was.

So why did I hear someone whispering?

I looked around in a panic.

"Myusel—?!"

Myusel was there.

No—not just her. Minori-san and Elvia, too. I didn't know when they had arrived or how long they had been there, but now they were illuminated as if by a spotlight.

None of them said anything. Instead, the three girls kept looking at each other, occasionally shooting little glances in my direction. They had their hands to their mouths and were whispering to each other, like old ladies spreading the latest gossip.

Then, for some reason, Minori-san took a step closer.

"That's some pretty face, huh?"

What the heck? Why did she sound so... masculine? Like the older brother at a morgue seeing the corpse of his younger twin...

"Heh," Minori-san went on, pointing at me and the girl. "Some guys have all the goddamn luck, eh?"

".....Huh?"

My gaze vacantly followed Minori-san's pointing finger.

At some point, I discovered, the girl in the black dress had become completely naked.

Not a scrap of clothing on her, naked as the day she was born. But... There was no bulge at her chest. Instead, the bulge was between her legs... and *what* a bulge! And it was standing at attention—

"Huh?! *Huh?!*"

My brain, which until that moment had been partially paralyzed, suddenly kicked into high gear—and I remembered the name of the girl sitting on top of me.

No—not the girl.

His name was Ayasaki Hikaru-san. The other otaku who had come from

Japan to be my assistant. And a real, true, bona fide—

"I," Hikaru-san said with a languorous smile, "am perfectly happy with one of you cute little straight boys."

"Who are you, the Yaranaika guy?!"

But my little one-liner didn't get me anywhere—Hikaru-san grabbed me by the collar of my shirt. With great gusto, he opened both his hands wide. Buttons went flying, and suddenly I was exposed to the world, and Hikaru-san's gaze.

"Noooo!" I gave a girlish scream and covered my chest.

But that meant I didn't have any hands left to defend my pants. His manner terrifyingly casual, Hikaru-san pulled my belt away, stripped off my pants, and then he was reaching for my underwear...!

"N-No, please don't!" I protested.

At this rate, this book is in danger of being declared harmful to youth! Er, I mean—

I don't want to lose my maidenhead before my virginity...!

Er, or maybe I had that backward! But anyway, the point was, I wasn't exactly jealously guarding my first time, but I didn't want to have it stolen by a man...!

I tossed and turned, trying to escape, but Hikaru-san held down my shoulders, much stronger than he looked. And from that mounted position, it was easy enough for him to pin my flailing arms with his knees.

This was bad. I couldn't get free.

There was nothing to save me now. Myusel and the others were just looking our way and whispering.

"Ah... Ahh..."

The blood drained from my face. Hikaru-san leaned closer.

Even at this moment, his face was very pretty—it still looked like a girl's face to me, and maybe that was as close to salvation as I would come.

But... But...!

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

It was with that scream that I woke up.

I opened my eyes to find myself drenched in an unpleasant sweat. I checked my smartphone, which was by my bed, and found that it was still quite a bit earlier than I usually got up. Gentle morning sunlight peeked through the curtains in stark contrast to my bleak mood, and I could hear birds chirping happily outside.

It would have been a really beautiful morning, if it hadn't been for that dream.

I put a hand to my chest and could feel my heart pounding, and not in a good way. It was just a dream. I knew that, but my body hadn't gotten the message yet. I didn't seem likely to fall back asleep at this rate.

"Sigh..."

I changed clothes without much enthusiasm, then decided to have a walk around the house in hopes that it would refresh me a little. Just sitting around seemed likely to invite flashbacks of that nightmare. A bit of exercise might be just what I needed.

"This sucks..."

I headed for the dining area, still periodically shaking.

The early hour meant I didn't see anyone else on the way over. Even so, I assumed Myusel, Brooke, and Cerise were all up and at work already.

"Mornin'," I half-whispered as I entered the dining area.

As I expected, there was no one there. Myusel was probably in the adjacent kitchen. There were a lot of mouths to feed and several different diets to observe, so the kitchen was a busy place in the morning. I didn't want to cause Myusel any trouble by distracting her, so I just sat in my chair and waited.

"Mmm..." I sighed and stretched, then slumped down into the chair.

"Ah, Shinichi-kun."

"Er... Matoba-san?"

I looked up to see the bureaucrat just coming into the dining area.

"You're up early," he said with a smile.

"Speak for yourself. Is something up?" As I recalled, he had said he had to get back to Japan in a hurry. Or had he already been there and back again?

"Oh, I just got back here a bit sooner than expected. As I had the time, I thought I would drop in and see how things were going." That seemed to support my theory.

“Should I go get Minori-san and Hikaru-san?”

“That won’t be necessary. I’m not really here on any specific business.”

With that, Matoba-san sat down at the table across from me. Faced with a man easily old enough to be my father, I found myself sitting up straighter. Not that I had anything in particular to talk to him about right now...

“Say, Matoba-san,” I said, briefly thinking back on my nightmare. “Why didn’t you say anything about Hikaru-san being a guy?”

He could have just introduced my new assistant as a man up front.

To my barbed question, however, Matoba-san responded with a blank look and an inquisitive tilt of his head. “You didn’t know?”

“Let’s just say it was a bit of a shock when I found out,” I said.

Plus I’d had to look at a naked dude when I was totally unprepared for it. I was sure that nightmare was residual trauma from that experience.

“I don’t believe announcing someone’s gender is a typical part of introducing them.”

“Well, er... That’s true, but...” I wanted to think Hikaru-san constituted a special case. “It’s a kind of androgynous name, and with the way he was dressed... Wouldn’t most people assume he was a girl?”

“Ahh. I see,” Matoba-san said with a bit of a dry smile. “I saw his resume before I interviewed him, so I wasn’t so shocked.” In other words, misunderstandings are a lot less likely when you know he’s a guy going in.

Honestly, though, given what a convincing girl Hikaru-san made, it seemed like it might be natural to just, you know, say something about it. Or did this guy really not think of anyone as anything besides the info and photo on their paperwork?

“As I recall, I did refer to him as Hikaru-*kun*...”

“Well, yes, you did...”

Matoba-san could see I wasn’t quite convinced. “What *do* you think of Hikaru-kun?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Is he fitting in?”

“Yeah. I can’t believe he’s only been here a few days.”

It was true: Hikaru-san had only been in the Holy Eldant Empire for three days. To be precise, this was the morning of the fourth day.

He had pretty much been part of the action from the moment he got

here, and by his third day, he was on good terms with almost all the students. I'd often seen him chatting happily with all the various members of our household, and I hadn't heard of any disagreements or trouble.

When I saw all the costumes and various other things he'd brought along with him, I got the impression that unlike me, he had known what was coming and had been able to prepare for it. But even so, I could only admire how thoroughly prepared he was.

I wondered when it was that I had gotten used to this world, had started to be accepted here.

I wasn't sure, but I knew it had taken more than three days.

"Honestly, I'm almost a little jealous."

"Well, we learned from our experience with you, Shinichi-kun. We made sure to inform Hikaru-kun of what would be happening. Perhaps that made the difference. In any event, I'm glad to hear he's getting along."

"He sure is."

"He's very talented, you know." All of a sudden, I thought I heard something portentous in Matoba-san's tone. "He had to be, to be chosen as your assistant."

"Uh...huh," I replied with an ambiguous smile.

I might normally take that sort of remark to mean that Matoba-san was calling me an even *more* talented person, but it was dangerous to take anything this guy said at face value. Even if he wasn't exactly my enemy at the moment, the Japanese government stood behind him—and given how impertinently I had opposed their plans, I doubted they thought very well of me.

Having said that, I *had* gotten myself accepted in the Holy Eldant Empire much more quickly and much more thoroughly than the government had expected—including becoming good friends with Petralka. Set aside the question of whether that was deliberate: if you thought of this as a sort of infiltration op... well, I'd done a pretty good job.

So in short, Japan may not have really wanted to keep me as the general manager of Amutech, but as things stood, replacing me with someone else would be too much of a blow to their efficiency to be a viable option.

"Master? Matoba-sama?" a familiar voice said.

Both of us looked toward the kitchen door. There was Myusel, standing with a look of surprise on her face. She wasn't used to seeing me up this

early—and definitely not with Matoba-san for company.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were here. I'll make tea right away."

"Oh, don't trouble yourself," Matoba-san said easily, holding up a hand. "I was just on my way out."

Then he stood and started out of the room—but he paused at the door. He turned to me with a cheerful smile. "Play nice with Hikaru-kun, now."

"Hrm..." I gave a noncommittal nod, to which Matoba-san once again waved, then quickly showed himself out.

Now it was just me and Myusel in the dining area.

"Uh, um... Would you like t-tea?"

"Nah, don't worry about it. I just got up early and came to clear my head a bit."

"Clear your head, sir?" Myusel looked at me with an inquisitive tilt of her head. No matter how many times she did that, it was always cute!

"Yeah," I muttered, "I'm definitely more of a Myusel guy."

"Er...?"

"A girl can be really cute, but a flat chest and a hard body are just deal-breakers for me. I want someone with a little roundness, someone who looks like they'd be soft to hug."

"Shinichi-sama..." Myusel's white cheeks turned scarlet.

"Huh? Oh..."

Crud. Did I say that out loud?

"Er, ah, y'see..."

"I, uh... I'll just go get breakfast ready...!"

Without waiting for me to try to come up with an excuse, Myusel zipped out of the room and into the kitchen.

Ahh, Myusel. You're like detergent for my soul!

As I sat there, moe-ing it up in an attempt to clear away the clouds of my nightmare, my heart filled with that classic, tender bittersweetness.

After another day of classes at the school, we came back home, where we sat in the living area, doing whatever we felt like. We were all in the same room together, but we were each just doing our own thing. This

stretch of time until dinner was brief, but richly relaxing.

I continued in a light novel I'd been reading. Myusel was bringing tea to each of us in the room. And Minori-san seemed to be typing up a report on her laptop.

As for Elvia, she was drawing industriously in her sketchbook, apparently doing some type of design. Hikaru-san was peeking over her shoulder at her drawing. Incidentally, Hikaru-san was dressed in another Gothic-Loli outfit, although not the Suiren one. Our newest resident didn't seem to feel any compulsion to wear anything more typical.

"Shinichi-san?"

At the sound of my name, I looked up from my novel to see Hikaru-san looking in my direction. She—I mean he—had his hand at his chin as if he was thinking about something.

"I was thinking. What if we tried bringing in some trading cards?"

"Huh? Trading cards?" I blinked.

Trading cards. In Japan, we called them *torekaa* for short.

As an otaku, they were a perfectly familiar bit of merchandise to me, but I hadn't tried introducing them here yet. The biggest reason was simply that I wasn't that interested—had never been that into them, really.

"Do you know why trading cards were so quick to catch on when they were first invented?" Hikaru-san asked.

"Huh? Er, uh, no," I said.

"It was because they're cheap enough that people can buy them with pocket change, and yet they fulfill the desire for acquisition. They're something you can purchase without thinking too hard about it."

"Oh, sure, I guess that makes sense."

For sure, I had seen plenty of elementary school kids buying cards at convenience stores or bookshops.

"At the same time," Hikaru-san went on, "from a vendor's perspective, the return on floor space dedicated to cards is very high."

"Sorry?" I said. The discussion had suddenly taken a turn for the technical.

"Even a pack of ten cards takes up virtually no space, right?"

"Yeah, sure."

I nodded, picturing one of those boxes stuffed with packs of trading cards. A box with ten or twenty packs could still practically fit in the palm

of your hand.

“Say a pack of ten cards costs a hundred yen. So if you have twenty packs in the box, that’s two thousand yen. And yet you dedicate less space in your store to those twenty packs then you would to two paperback books. If one book sells for six hundred yen, you aren’t quite at double the profit, but it’s still obviously a better return on your investment.”

“.....Ah.”

Now that he mentioned it...

Trading cards were usually put right next to the cash register as an impulse item. I had always thought of this as being primarily because it made the purchase easier for the customer, but considering it more carefully, I realized that what it really implied was that the store didn’t need a specialized, dedicated space for the cards. You didn’t have to line oodles of them up. It meant you could sell one more thing in your store without having to give any additional space to it. You didn’t even need any specialist knowledge to sell them.

I could see why that sort of calculus would appeal to store owners. And from the perspective of Amutech’s business...

“They’re easy to transport, which means they would be simple to bring to this world,” Hikaru-san said. “They’re also cheap and you can buy them anywhere, so procurement wouldn’t be a problem. And a collection fits in your pocket, but you can pull it out and brag to your friends about all the cards you’ve got.”

“It’s... It’s starting to make sense,” I said.

“I can see all the works that are already a big hit here in Eldant, with the students and the people around them. Since they don’t seem to have any objection to anime- or manga-style art, I’m sure they would be fascinated by the beautiful pictures on some trading cards.”

“Yeah, that’s true...” I nodded, picturing how the students would react.

There were several differences between otaku and non-otaku, and in my experience, one of the brightest lines was an interest in the people on the production side of any given work.

What I mean is, some people pore over the credits in an anime, checking out the names of the director, the character designer, the animation director, the scriptwriter, the production studio, and on and on. When you hear someone talking knowledgeably about things like how they love the art in

episode X because so-and-so was the animation director, you know you're dealing with a bona fide otaku.

Now that I thought about it, though, recently the students at school had stopped talking exclusively in terms of "pretty art" or "cute art," and had started saying that they liked the way X-sensei drew girls, or that the way Y-sensei handled hips was sexy, or that when it came to thighs, Z-sensei was the undisputed master, and so on and so forth. That is to say, they were starting to be able to discern personal differences in artistic style.

It would only be natural, then, for them to take an interest in trading cards, where the illustrations were done by a variety of artists. It was like a gallery of lovely pictures small enough to fit in your pocket. Then again, there was also the possibility that the Eldant people would see trading cards as revolutionary, a totally new concept.

Then there was the fact that a lot of trading cards depicted things the students already enjoyed: stories they knew, familiar characters, and of course, monsters and robots and stuff. Not to mention cards inspired you to want to collect them all. There were a lot of facets to cards' attractiveness.

"Don't forget, production and transport costs are low enough to make it economical—and probably profitable—to import large amounts of product," Hikaru-san said.

"Hang on—large amounts? How much do you think people are going to buy?"

"Consider that they're also excellent Japanese language teaching material."

"Uh...?"

"Most cards have some sort of explanatory text on them, right? Or at the very least, a card name."

"Right..."

"People might not be able to get longer sentences immediately, but I'll bet a lot of them could pick out vocabulary and decipher shorter sentences. Gaining that understanding would make the cards even more fun. And since so many cards are used as part of a game rather than purely for collecting, they could learn while they play." Hikaru-san was smiling now.

He was right; picking up vocabulary in the context of a game did make it easier to remember. What it all meant was that in addition to introducing a product with high profit margins, Amutech could simultaneously hope to

quietly increase its customer base. Trading cards were cheap, portable, and easily understood, so they might give the Eldant masses—most of whom were currently illiterate—their first real brush with otaku culture.

Ooh. It almost seemed too good to be true.

"As far as the cards go," Hikaru-san said, "rather than just importing packs and selling them as-is, I think we should open them and then sell individual cards in sleeves or packages that we make here."

"Why would we do that?"

"Individual cards would be cheaper. And I think it would be useful for the Eldant side to get used to being part of the supply chain."

"I mean, maybe..."

It *had* been in the original plan to have Eldant start producing otaku products that could then be exported to other countries around here. Some experimental otaku goods had already worked their way secretly into Bahairam, but that was the exception. I would certainly be happy to see them become more plentiful in the free market.

Then there was the little fact that I was opposed to the Japanese government's plan for cultural invasion.

A major pillar of that plan was for the government to control the supply of otaku goods—and if I could undermine that foundation, so much the better for resisting the weaponization of otaku stuff. So how could I not be on board with a plan that would help make Eldant a supplier of product?

"It's true that up until this point, it's just been us importing things for them to enjoy," Minori-san said with a nod. She was a member of the JSDF, and so technically part of the Japanese government, but she was also an otaku herself. Just like me, she wasn't thrilled at the idea of otaku products being turned into weapons of invasion, and she had a lot of sympathy for my perspective.

"So," Hikaru-san said with a glance at the beast girl beside him. "I was thinking maybe we could have Elvia-san do the illustrations for the packaging."

"M-Me?!" Elvia was very surprised to abruptly become the topic of conversation.

"You are Amutech's in-house artist, aren't you?"

"Well, yes, I am, but..."

"Then perhaps it's time you started doing some art."

“I get it,” I said, crossing my arms and thinking.

You know... This might be fun. It was always interesting to create something. That didn’t have to mean manga or novels or whatever. Coming up with a new plan and seeing it to fruition—making it real—is itself a form of creativity. I felt myself getting excited, just like I had when we had come up with the idea for the movie.

Along with our personal computer over here, we did have a printer and scanner, good business-grade equipment with relatively significant functionality. So far I had only ever used them to produce teaching materials for the school, but there was no reason we couldn’t set them to printing packaging.

Or better yet, why not use the printing technology available here? I had seen those broadside portraits of Petralka, which proved that local color printing technology was at a fairly sophisticated level. It might not be as crisp as a computer printer, and the details might seem just a little off, meaning that there could be minor variations in the quality of any given product... but we could consider that part of the experience.

Yeah. I liked where this was going.

“B-But my art isn’t...” Elvia still seemed hesitant. “Compared to the stuff that’s for sale, it’s just... different...”

She seemed to be talking about artistic style. Personally, I thought Elvia did terrific examples of “moe art,” very much in line with proper otaku products, but maybe there was something that kept her, as the artist, from being totally satisfied with them.

“Moe art and otaku things don’t have any hard and fast rules. They aren’t some kind of tradition or anything. It’s all about whether the audience can feel moe about them or not,” Hikaru-san said firmly. “Elvia-san, I think your art is excellent. What about you, Shinichi-san?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I love your stuff, too, Elvia. I think it’s terrific.”

“Y’ really mean that?” Elvia looked at me, her eyes wide. Her tail, which had been hanging limply, wagged slightly behind her.

Elvia was easy to read if nothing else. It was part of what was so adorable about her.

“Y’ really do like my work, Shinichi-sama?”

“Sure I do. I’ve told you before. If I didn’t like what you were doing, Amutech wouldn’t have kept you on as its artist.”

Elvia turned bright red—was she that happy to hear her work praised?

"Okay! I'll do it! I'm all over the packaging for your 'cards'!"

All of a sudden she was super into it. I could practically see the flame burning behind her. It looked like she was 100% on board now.

"Well, it looks like that's settled. I'll talk to Matoba-san tomorrow or the next day," Hikaru-san said.

"Oh, sure. Thanks," I said, nodding.

Nodding was all I could do. No matter how you looked at this idea, there was absolutely no reason for me to object or oppose it.

If anything...

"What kinda pictures do you think I should do?"

"Good question. Given what I've observed among the students over the past several days, it seems like the most popular features are—"

Hikaru-san and Elvia had already begun an impromptu conference on the content of the packaging. I let their conversation drift in one ear and out the other; the only thing I felt was sheer amazement. You could even say I was overwhelmed.

Unlike me, Hikaru-san was clearly capable of viewing otaku products from a business perspective. The profit margins on trading cards? I had never once thought about such a thing.

I had been importing things into this world on the basis of what I thought was interesting. It was really nothing more than the desire to share what I liked, so that everyone could enjoy it together.

But Hikaru-san was different. She—er, he—didn't think about things as a consumer, but rather more like a creator or producer. More like someone on the supply side of the equation.

"He's very talented, you know. He had to be, to be chosen as your assistant."

Matoba-san's words came back to me. And he was right: Hikaru-san was tremendously capable.

More so than me, really.

I wasn't upset about that. It was a good thing to have another talented person in my circle. But it's true that I felt something akin to nervousness.

If Hikaru-san was really that much more distinguished than I was—then

what if they decided they didn't need me anymore?

I had already gone against the Japanese government once. The only reason I was still General Manager of Amutech was because it was the most efficient way for the government to ingratiate the company here in Eldant. They knew that if they just went and got rid of me, it would invite the ire of the Eldant government. I was simply too close to Petralka.

But Hikaru-san had already begun to endear himself to the empress. He was already proving how much more effective he could be than me. And if the Japanese government took that to heart...?

Another incursion by the special forces—successful this time? Or maybe I would just be forcibly sent back to Japan?

No, stop. These grim fantasies weren't going to help anyone. Letting my imagination get carried away was a bad habit of mine.

"I've been thinkin' I'd like to do something like this," Elvia said, striking a pose where she covered her chest with one arm. It squeezed her boobs in a way that was kind of sexy, but not low-class. A spot-on moe pose. But the ability to strike that pose at a moment's notice showed just how deeply Elvia had gotten lost in my world—how well acquainted she had become with otaku culture.

I didn't say anything. Elvia seemed to be having fun, and that was worth a lot.

That was what I told myself, anyway, as I finally turned back to my novel and tried to focus on the words.

Boobs
Looking up cutely
Moe
High angle
Golden ratio
Focal point

I had eaten dinner and taken my bath, and was nearly back to my room when I noticed someone coming down the hall from the other direction and stopped. The other person seemed to notice me, too, because they looked up from arms full of something.

"Shinichi-san," Hikaru-san said, coming to a halt and smiling softly.

Her—ahem, his—arms were full of clothes.

They were probably the cosplay costumes he had brought from Japan. And there were plenty of them. He had a firm grip on them, but even cloth had to get heavy after a point. I felt a little concerned just looking at him.

"Want some help?" I asked.

"No, I'm fine," Hikaru-san said.

"Yeah? You sure have an awful lot of clothes there."

"These are the ones I lent to Myusel-san and Elvia-san. Minori-san and I got a little carried away and just tried them in everything we could think of. I had them laundered, and now I'm just bringing them back to my room."

"Ahh..."

I thought back to Myusel and Elvia, dressed in Gothic-Loli outfits. Hikaru-san and Minori-san had enjoyed having the two girls cosplay—or whatever you wanted to call it in this case—on Hikaru-san's very first day here, and I gathered that since then, they had asked Myusel and Elvia around several more times to try on new dresses. Cerise, for what it's worth, wasn't involved; her body type and proportions were just too different from Hikaru-san's.

...Hang on.

I knew it was a little late to be worrying about this, but was this really okay? I mean, Hikaru-san was a guy... so what did he do when the girls were changing?

"It takes time to wash something with this much lace and decorations."

"Oh, huh..."

As casually as I could, I scoped out Hikaru-san's body again. Long, black hair. Slim build. Pretty face. Black lace can look really tasteless if you get it even a little bit wrong, but it actually looked really good on Hikaru-

san. I had never known anyone else who wore Gothic-Loli so well. It looked cute on Myusel and Elvia in part because they would look cute in anything, but I couldn't deny a certain sense that the outfits had been "wearing them," so to speak. But Hikaru-san looked absolutely at ease in the style.

But still... a dude.

I heaved a mental sigh. Even looking at him right now, all I saw was a girl. To be honest, as long as I couldn't see... you know, what was between his legs... it seemed almost impossible for me *not* to think of him that way.

"Something on my face?" Hikaru-san asked with a wry smile.

"Huh? Er, no," I said quickly.

Hikaru-san was a type of person I'd never had around me before. Even though I was an otaku, I didn't have much experience with cosplay, and even less with crossplay. Nor did I know anyone or have any friends who were into those kinds of things. So I didn't have a good grasp of what would move a guy to dress like a cute young girl. I just knew that everyone had their own way of thinking about things... and that there were some preferences strangers didn't have a lot of sympathy for, and that if you weren't careful in how you approached people, you could end up causing pain.

After all, I knew what it was like to be hurt by someone's unexamined assumptions about me.

So yes, I could have said something like, "That Goth-Loli stuff looks great on you, you don't even look like a guy!" but maybe that would turn out to be stepping on the tiger's tail.

To be perfectly honest, I wasn't entirely sure how to interact with this "new employee" of mine. It made every time we talked a little harder than it had to be.

But then:

"Maybe you're thinking, *ah, but he's a guy*," Hikaru-san said teasingly.

"Huh? No, I wasn't—" I had definitely not expected Hikaru-san to be the one to broach the subject, and it caught me off guard. "I mean, uh, when I found out you were a man, yes, I was honestly a little surprised."

"That's only natural. Everyone is," Hikaru-san said with a nod—and then set off walking with his armfuls of clothes.

The conversation obviously wasn't finished—I couldn't just watch him

go. So I fell into step behind him.

"To be honest," Hikaru-san said, "I don't, like, want to become a girl or anything. I'm not one of those people who feels like they have a woman's heart in a man's body."

"Oh. Okay."

But then... Why?

"My parents... It seems like my parents wanted a girl."

"Huh?"

"Both of my parents are otaku. They met at Comiket! When they had a kid, they just wanted to dress it up, so I've been wearing girl-character outfits from a pretty young age. By the time I could think for myself, these kinds of frilly dresses already seemed normal to me, or... I couldn't fight back against them."

"Uh-huh..."

That's what you call being dyed in the wool.

"I don't dislike looking cute, and it seemed to make everyone around me so happy..."

"And so you just got used to looking like a girl?"

"Yeah, more or less," Hikaru-san said with a dry smile. "And I like to dress people up in cute outfits myself, so I can sympathize with my parents."

"Oh, like you did with Myusel and Elvia..." Hikaru-san really did seem to have fun with that.

There was no denying that the two girls had looked incredible in that cosplay, or that the disconnect with how they normally looked had produced an equal and moe reaction. So much so, in fact, that I might have found myself compelled to wheedle a few of Minori-san's copious photos out of her.

"Minori-san isn't a big fan of Gothic-Loli, though," Hikaru-san said.

"Ah..." That was true. Minori-san was Hikaru-san's opposite number, a specialist in male costumes.

"I told her it would be easy enough to alter the chest, but..."

"Ahh..."

I gave a wry grin of my own. I knew Minori-san didn't object to Gothic-Loli on grounds of body type. Just like Hikaru-san, she was the child of someone who had wanted offspring of the opposite gender, and that was

why she wasn't so into women's clothing.

Now that I thought about it, she and Hikaru-san actually had a lot in common. Minori-san was a "layer," too, who frequently cosplayed as characters of the opposite gender. But then...

She definitely doesn't act like a man.

She had a bright and cheerful personality, for sure, but she also had a womanly gentleness to her.

So I thought: maybe Hikaru-san didn't crossplay because he was uncomfortable with his biological gender, or out of any desire to express an "inner gender," but purely because he enjoyed wearing those clothes, like a kind of roleplay or game.

"Say, Shinichi-san, your parents are otaku too, right?" Hikaru-san asked. "I heard from Matoba-san. Something about how you and I are both 'thoroughbred otaku.' He didn't give me the details, though."

"Oh, uh, yeah, I guess so. 'Thoroughbred' might be taking it a bit far." I nodded. "My dad is a light novel author, and my mom used to work on ero games."

"Wow, that's cool!" Hikaru-san looked impressed.

"Is it, though?"

I shook my head, picturing my parents in my mind's eye. Neither of them struck me as exactly being an ideal parental unit. At the very least, I figured no normal parent would slice through their shut-in son's door with a chainsaw. Strictly compared to the average parent, I suppose they could be considered colossal failures.

"My parents, neither of them ever made it pro."

"Huh...? Oh—oh yeah?"

Hikaru-san had mentioned that his parents met each other at Comiket. And while cosplayers were definitely respected there, the big draw at Comiket was the doujinshi. I wouldn't be surprised to find out that both of Hikaru-san's parents were there as creators, whether of fan spin-offs or original work.

"I gather they tried to make it big, but it just didn't work out. They found that the quick ways to make money were copying whatever was popular, or making X-rated doujinshi." There was that half-smile again.

"Ahh..."

I definitely knew those stories. If you could pump out one popular work

after another, it would make you plenty of money to live on—sometimes hundreds of thousands of yen. Of course, it also required the artistic agility to keep your style up to date, and a fine sense of what was going to be the next big thing.

"Well, I guess being a pro doesn't inherently make a creator a great person," I said, thinking of my father and mother. "My parents always told me that sometimes it's best not to do what you really love for your job, that it can take away your ability to watch those works for enjoyment."

When you go pro, my mom and dad often told me, you lose the ability to make work just for the love of it. What professionals produce is to sell—the customer comes first, and rather than doing what you want to do the way you want to do it, your primary responsibility is to produce something that will sell.

They also warned me that you can lose the ability to simply enjoy the creations of others. Whatever you look at, you can't help thinking how you would do it another way, or how you could fit a given part of it into your own work, and so on and so forth.

"Plus, all-nighters were par for the course before a draft was due or when a game development deadline came up, so at times like that they could be pretty irritable or... well, just not a lot of fun to be around."

"Oh, really?"

"I mean, I can only speak for my own parents, but..." I shrugged.

They would have an energy drink in one hand and a coffee in the other, no time to even take a bath, let alone get any sleep, just locked up in their room working... It wasn't a recipe for a pleasant disposition.

The upshot is, I never really thought about becoming a creator. In fact, it made me think that anyone who could endure a life like that and not just quit must really be doing it because they loved it. Because they couldn't imagine doing anything else. At least, that was my suspicion.

"It sounds like both of us suffered a bit on account of our parents," Hikaru-san said with a laugh.

"Guess so."

Granted, given the time I had spent as a parasitic home security guard, I didn't exactly have the right to criticize my family too harshly.

Finally we arrived at Hikaru-san's room.

"I'll see you, then," I said.

“Yeah. Sleep well.”

I left Hikaru-san there and headed back down the hallway.

“It’s starting to make sense...”

As I walked back to my room, I reviewed my chat with Hikaru-san. His mercenary streak—the way he looked not just at the content of a given work, but at the best way to sell it as well—might just show the influence of parents who made doujinshi while also keeping a finger on the pulse of what was popular. It reflected the idea that you could pick genres based on what was big rather than what you personally liked, a surprisingly businesslike approach to the often passion-infused work of making fan comics.

I had no idea whether doing it that way was any fun. But it opened my eyes to the idea that you could create something that way, that you could have that sort of relationship with creative works. It was a notion I found just a little bit surprising.

Roughly once a week, a delivery would be made from Japan to the training ground located in a far corner of the downtown area.

Unlike the official cargo brought in as part of Amutech’s business ventures, these loads were full of personal items for the JSDF members stationed here. In other words, not technically anything to do with me.

For the most part, if there was anything I wanted, like an anime, manga, light novel, or other otaku merchandise, I could just officially requisition it and have it brought over as trade goods. Not only would it arrive quicker, it would even be delivered directly to the mansion. I didn’t want to go to nuts mixing business and private shipments, but I had to admit it was convenient.

When it came to personal-interest items that had absolutely nothing to do with Amutech, though, I would ask Minori-san, and she would get them included in the regular JSDF shipment. Like when I got cravings for junk food that wasn’t available in the Eldant Empire, such as potato chips or cola. Myusel made wonderful meals and I couldn’t complain about my diet, but this was something else.

As it happened, today was the day of that regular delivery.

I was there to receive an order, as was Minori-san, and Brooke was with us to help lug things around. Our presence had become pretty standard, but today Myusel and Hikaru-san were with us, too. Myusel would periodically ask Minori-san to help her obtain Japanese ingredients so that she could make dishes with rice or soy sauce. She was here today to see that her order had arrived safely.

“Ooh, here it comes!”

We kept one eye on the kids—they were bound for the military when they grew up, and were currently training nearby—as we headed for where the shipping containers were piled on top of each other.

“Ahh, the day has finally come!” Minori-san walked beside me, chuckling to herself in a way I found more than a little disturbing. “Takai-sensei’s new stuff, Misagi-sensei’s new stuff, the fan disc of Gakuen Rakuen...”

“Minori-san, your face.”

Her expression had practically melted, until it seemed like it could put ice on a century-old love affair. Yikes. How yikes? Well, Myusel was walking on the other side of me, and it was enough to make her draw a face and fall back a step.

It’s not like I didn’t understand how Minori-san felt. It’s always exciting when something you’ve been waiting for finally shows up.

“C’mon, slowpokes!”

Unable to wait any longer, Minori-san went rushing ahead.

“Oh, I’ll help!” Myusel said, hurrying after her.

Hikaru-san, Brooke, and I followed behind.

“Sorry I’m always dragging you away from your gardening, Brooke,” I said.

“Think nothing of it, sir.” He shook his head. “Does it seem there’s more cargo than usual?”

“Hmm. I wouldn’t say that, but it might be heavy. We ordered a lot of rice and miso and such. Elvia really wolfs that stuff down.”

Maybe the flavors of Japanese food really agreed with Elvia, because she easily ate three times as much of it as I did. Yet she never seemed to put on any weight. It was enough to make me think that her basic metabolism was different, or maybe it was the result of being so well-muscled.

“It would’ve been nice if we could have gotten her to help us, too,” I said. Elvia had a werewolf’s strength, which made carting around cargo a pretty simple task.

“There wasn’t much we could do,” Hikaru-san said. “She got so into the card idea that she hasn’t come out of her room since.”

“True enough.”

As Hikaru-san said, Elvia had become a shut-in herself.

She was currently doing the art for the trading card packaging. This would actually be the second one. The first one had already been piloted—which is to say, the sale of trading cards had already started, primarily at the school. Hikaru-san had said he would handle the legwork, so I left him to take care of most card-related matters. It sounded like the new product was doing pretty well.

That was exactly why we had decided to bring in another bunch from Japan, the packaging for which Elvia was at that very moment feverishly designing. The sight of *her* pictures being printed and distributed *en masse* had a distinctly positive effect on her, and she had thrown herself into the new design. Hence why we had given up on coaxing her into coming along today.

In any event, it looked like introducing trading cards to the Eldant Empire had been a good call.

“Oooh hoo hoo hoo hoo!”

Minori-san, the endless grin still on her face, was taking a cardboard box out of a shipping container with Myusel’s help. When I got to the containers, I joined the JSDF soldiers in extracting the contents and making sure everything was there.

When I was most of the way through, I looked up.

“Okay, so...”

All around me, people had finished getting their orders and had settled to chatting with each other. I let out a small sigh of relief to see things apparently safely wrapped up.

“Huh?”

That was when I noticed two cardboard boxes piled on top of each other in a corner.

Whose could those be? None of the soldiers seemed to be paying any attention to them, and Minori-san was already pawing happily through her

delivery, so they probably didn't belong to any of them.

I went over to the mystery boxes.

"Huh...?"

I furrowed my brow. The boxes had been torn, whether in transit or while being taken out of the shipping container, I didn't know. So I could just see inside...

"Those are personal items. Could you kindly not peek?"

"Ah..."

I turned and saw Hikaru-san walking toward me; as he went by, he swooped the boxes up in his arms. Whatever was in there, it wasn't very heavy.

"This is your stuff?"

"Yes. My name is on them, as you can see." He indicated the sides of the boxes.

"Er... What's in them?"

Hikaru-san didn't answer immediately, but gave me a mischievous grin. Then he tapped a finger to his lips before whispering, "Never ask a girl her secrets."

Er, ahem. With you, it's impossible to tell when you're joking around. Please be careful...

"Are you that interested in what a girl might be hiding, Shinichi-san?"

"N-No, I—"

I didn't know what to say. If I said I wasn't interested at all, it might sound like I was saying I didn't care about him as a person, but if I nodded eagerly, I suspected it would only cause a misunderstanding.

"Hey," I said, deciding to go with the easy out of a one-liner, "whooza girl here, anyway?"

"Why the drawl?"

"I thought that was supposed to make any one-liner funnier."

"Hehehe. Well, there are a few things in here I might be embarrassed for anyone to see, so I have to ask for your discretion." Hikaru-san turned, putting himself between me and the cardboard boxes. Brooke happened to be passing by at just that moment. "Brooke-san," Hikaru-san said, holding the boxes out, "would you be so kind as to take care of these?"

"O' course. Put 'em right here, please." He indicated the three boxes he was already holding. Hikaru-san placed his two, smaller boxes on top.

“I’ll put ’em in the carriage,” Brooks said, and shuffled away. I gazed vacantly after him.

“Shinichi-san? Is something the matter?” Hikaru-san asked me.

“N-Nothing! Nothing at all,” I said with a hint of panic.

“Is that all the cargo?” Minori-san asked as she came up with her arms full of boxes. It looked like she was more or less sane again, having confirmed that all the stuff she wanted was present and accounted for. Beside her was Myusel with another box.

“I guess so,” I said, checking over my own box once again and nodding.

“Let’s get going, then,” Minori-san said, and the three of us headed for the bird-drawn carriage.

I couldn’t help thinking, though, about what I thought I had seen in Hikaru-san’s box. It looked like it was stuffed with memory cards—all of the same type, at that.

What was he planning to use all those for?

Hikaru-san had brought his own laptop computer over here, and I was sure they must go with that—but did he need so many of just one type? Wouldn’t a portable hard drive have been a more efficient form of storage? Even if he was planning to use them with a digital camera or something, it wasn’t realistic to think he would switch them out so often.

I was left with a questioning look on my face. Oh, well. I didn’t know if they were a *girl’s* secrets, exactly, but since he had said they were private, I couldn’t very well press the matter. Maybe he just... liked to collect memory cards. Okay, so it wasn’t very likely. But it wasn’t impossible.

“Hmmmm...”

I felt like something was wrong, though, even if I didn’t know what it was. It was a sense I couldn’t shake, even as I climbed aboard the carriage with my boxes.

The next morning...

“G’morning.”

When I arrived at the classroom at school, I found the students thoroughly absorbed in something. It was rare for the students to pay me no

mind at all when I came in; it seemed less like they were ignoring me and more like they were completely engaged in whatever they were looking at. The wall of bodies kept me from seeing what exactly it was from the doorway.

"It's always my turn!"

Didn't I know that line from somewhere? Whoever was saying it sounded very confident.

There was still time before class started, so I moved up as quietly as I could, so as not to disturb whoever was playing. I peeked in between the rows of students.

"Hrr! In that case—"

"Ha ha ha! It's futile! Feast your eyes on *this*!"

"Wh-What?!"

"It costs zero and reflects all damage back at the opponent! You take 160 damage!"

"Hey, that's no fair!"

"It's all right here on the card!"

Two human students appeared to be dueling each other in a card game.

"You don't have a copy? Too bad for you!"

"Where'd you even get—"

"Ha ha ha! With this card, I'm invincible!"

"Grr..."

"Now, moving on!"

And so on and so forth.

It looked like the game had turned pretty lopsided, with one of the players making a punching bag of the other. The card illustrations depicted adorable characters, but the actual card effects seemed really nasty. It was hardly even a fight.

I didn't know much about card games, but this...

"Hah! *Hah!* I win!"

I gathered that the battle was over.

There had simply been too much of a gap in the abilities of the players' cards. It was like bringing a knife or a gun to what was supposed to be a fist fight. Whatever rare card that kid had, the moment it came out, the other student's chances of victory had vanished.

"Now," the winning student said, holding out his hand to the loser,

whose shoulders slumped dejectedly. Slowly, reluctantly, the loser gave one of his own cards to the winner.

.....Wha?

"Uh—Uh, excuse me!" I said, pushing past the other students and approaching the players.

"Oh, Shinichi-sensei. Good morning, sir."

"Morning. No! I mean—did the guy who lost just give you a card?"

"Hm? Oh, sure." The students all nodded.

"Wh-Why would he do that?"

"Why? That's the rule, sir," the winner said with a smile. "Were you not aware of that?"

"Er, cards are more Hikaru-san's—"

Hikaru-san's thing, I was going to say. *I'm not really that familiar with them.*

The student must have figured what I was going to say, because he replied with a smile, "The winner can take any one card they like from the loser. That's what gives these battles their excitement!"

"Huh, easy for you to say. You're the one who goes around getting all the powerful cards so you can win." The resentful mutter came from the losing student. "I saw you, buying that super-powered card earlier."

"Huh...?"

Buying?

The winner didn't look very happy about that. "That was a fair exchange based on mutual consent. Everyone's doing it. If you don't like it, go get some powerful cards of your own." His tone was awfully harsh, and just for a second, I thought a fight might break out. But happily, it didn't come to that. At length, the two students cleaned up their cards and went back to their seats.

I was silent for a long while. Buying? Were people really that into the cards?

I understood trading to complete your set or something. But the way they'd been talking, it didn't sound like that was what they were referring to.

I looked around the classroom.

Almost as soon as Hikaru-san had started selling the trading cards, they had become a big hit both at the school and with everyone connected to it.

Students carrying their cards in the classroom had become a common sight. Maybe that's why I hadn't really noticed it.

No. I had seen it, but it just hadn't sunk in. I hadn't realized that when students were over in the corner of the classroom trading, cards weren't the only things changing hands.

It had been...

".....Money."

The bronze and silver pieces minted by the Eldant Empire.

I mean, these were merchandise to begin with, so maybe it wasn't that strange if the people who bought them then traded them on. They were called *trading* cards, after all. They might even sell extra cards to people who didn't have them.

But no matter how you sliced it, the amounts of money being paid for a single card were weird.

Maybe it was my imagination, but I thought that when I saw students trading, some of them had been giving change. That implied the cards had a market value, and that there was a difference in "price" between cards that couldn't be ignored.

What the heck was going on here?! Something was wrong, even though I couldn't say exactly what. It gave me the creeps.

Wasn't this basically gambling? Heck, we were lucky gambling was all it was. If this sort of thing escalated, it could lead to extortion, people stealing cards from one another, and who knew what else? I was pretty sure things like that had happened in Japan already...

"Hikaru-san...?" Almost unconsciously, I found myself looking for the Japanese who had introduced trading cards to the Eldant Empire.

"Yes? Can I help you, Shinichi-san?"

Hikaru-san, who had arrived at the classroom a little later than me, was seated beside the lectern. He was reading what appeared to be a light novel, from which he now looked up at me with a quizzical tilt of the head.

"I know I decided to have you handle the trading cards..."

"Yes, that's true," Hikaru-san said, nodding evenly.

"So, uh, does that mean all the cards those kids are playing with are ones you imported?"

"I wouldn't know for sure without looking," Hikaru-san answered, "but I don't think the technology for printing PP-coated paper like on cards

exists in this world, does it? In principle, I control it."

I paused. "Come with me a sec."

I took Hikaru-san by the hand and pulled him to his feet, then led him out of the classroom.

"A few minutes ago, I saw a couple of students playing that card game, and... I mean, the balance seemed really off."

"How do you mean?" Hikaru-san's smile never faltered.

I furrowed my eyebrows, feeling oddly adrift. "I don't know much about card games, but when a single overpowered card lets one player walk over the other, that doesn't seem like good balance to me. Shouldn't a card game be a little more like, you know, Rock, Paper, Scissors? When you have some almighty, invincible card, it doesn't seem like much of a game anymore..."

The outcome ends up being decided not by strategy or tactics, but simply by the question of whether or not you have that particular card. That was why students were offering money exchange for powerful cards. Many times more money than the cards had originally sold for.

"Ahh," Hikaru-san said, his smile deepening. "Perfect. Just the effect I was looking for."

"Come again?"

"That, Shinichi-san," Hikaru-san said evenly, "is exactly what I hoped would happen."

"Exactly what... what you hoped...?" For a second, I was so stunned that all I could do was repeat his words dumbly.

Was Hikaru-san saying that he had deliberately introduced an unbalanced card game to Eldant? Had that game actually been designed from the ground up to be that one-sided?

"There are some cards so powerful that you can simply decimate your opponent," Hikaru-san said melodically. "And how do you think they look to people who are already obsessed with the game? Especially people who wager cards on the outcome?"

"I mean... They..."

Obviously, they would be desperate for cards like that.

Cards like that would be a license to just go "ME SO STRONG!!" all the time. And if you also got an opponent's card from winning that way, you wouldn't just get to enjoy the bragging rights, you'd get actual spoils of

war. The cards were already becoming market products here in Eldant, selling for far more than they seemed worth to us Japanese. If you could obtain them just by battling...

"Even if you had to pay a boatload of money for them..." It was then that it dawned on me. "Hikaru-san, you didn't—"

I remembered what the losing student had said.

Where'd you even get—

Did that imply the card wasn't normally for sale? Sure, there were rare cards in every trading card game. But despite this still being a pilot program, we had already sold close to ten thousand cards in the Eldant Empire. People should be pretty familiar with what was available by now.

"Hikaru-san... are you importing super powerful rares with no concern for balance and selling them at a premium?!"

Okay, hold on. Having little or no concern for balance was one thing. But was he doing it deliberately to *break* the balance?

The cards we were selling in Eldant had originally been sold in Japan. And the companies that produced these cards were pros; they knew better than to sell individual cards that would totally upend the balance of their game.

Again, this was a subject I didn't know a whole lot about, but I gathered that trading cards could be subject to expansions and more expansions, as many as they could sell, that could be added on to the original game. This was obviously in part to entice players and collectors, but it was also common to add flashier and more powerful cards to the game.

When you did that, you always added other cards, too, ones with special effects or ones that could counter the most powerful cards—all so that one player couldn't simply dominate everyone else just because they possessed a specific card. If you didn't, there wouldn't be any game left, and the people buying your trading cards would quickly stop.

"Yes. I've had to decide things like what to import, when to release it into the market, who to sell cards to, and how many, all chiefly by trial and error. I was worried it might not work." He didn't sound like he felt the least bit guilty about any of this.

Was this part of why he had wanted to open the packs before repackaging them here? So he could control the rares?

"But then..."

After all the work we went to to bring trading cards over here, people wouldn't be able to enjoy them. In fact, wasn't there a good chance that it would cause people with no interest in the cards themselves to treat them as investment products? That you would have warped players who didn't care about the game, but only fulfilling their desire to *have*?

"You're afraid investors and collectors will create a cutthroat trading market," Hikaru-san said as if he had read my mind. "Of course, that's well within my calculations. For that matter, how else could there be any point to controlling the market? You create deliberate inequality by introducing overpowered rare cards, let the market lie fallow for a while until enough card-flippers come along, then you toss in new products that can counter the overconcentration of those rare cards."

I was silent, astonished.

"By that point, people will already be used to a premium markup, so they'll think they're getting off cheap and flock to the new cards. Once things have started to even out a little bit, you bring in even more powerful cards or ones that nullify the previous ones, and sell those."

"Hang on. Hang on just a second, Hikaru-san. That's—"

"Yes? What is it?"

Hikaru-san cocked his head, as if to say, *I'm not doing anything wrong*.

"That's just so commercialistic."

It was against the spirit of the games themselves. It was a sales strategy that treated the customers as nothing more than objects to manipulate. Induced scarcity, deliberately inflated value. The only parallel I could think of was the drug trade.

"Wait. *Wait*..."

I thought of three words: the Opium Wars.

They were conflicts the English had manufactured with Qing China. Faced with a trade imbalance they couldn't seem to rectify, the British started producing opium in large quantities in order to prevent too much of their own currency from winding up in China. It was cheap even in huge amounts; they had it produced in India, which was a colony of theirs at the time, and then imported it to China to squelch the trade imbalance.

Some people, however, saw it as a kind of invasion strategy on the part of the British. Why? Well, after the Arrow War—the second of two conflicts known as the Opium Wars—a part of the Qing empire became a

colony of the British.

I know I'm hardly the first person to say this, but drugs and religion, when used in certain ways, can be powerful non-military means of invasion. Some people claim that from the Middle Ages until the modern era, England and Holland have deliberately sent one or both of those things to countries all over the world as a way of invading. And if you look even a little bit closely at any given history book, you'll find what seems to be proof of that. Because the topic provokes such passion, it's also often the subject of novels and manga.

"Shinichi-san?" Hikaru-san asked after a very long moment. His smile hadn't wavered a bit. "What are we?"

Even at that moment, he was so pretty I could barely imagine he was a man. Suddenly, I found something very sinister in that.

"What do you mean, what?"

"We're Amutech, an entertainment *company*." He emphasized the word *company*, so that it sounded particularly important. "We sell things for a living. Why are you so surprised if there's an element of commercialism?"

"Well, I mean—"

He was right, but...

"I'm grateful to you, Shinichi-san, and I respect you very much," Hikaru-san said. "The whole reason I can pull off this trading card scheme is because you've done so much to spread otaku culture already. Without your hard work, this could never have succeeded."

I caught my breath.

"But..." Hikaru-san's smile never slipped, frozen like a mask. "Your methods, Shinichi-san, are just not very profitable."

"I just— I—"

Sure. I'd heard that before. It hadn't escaped my notice, Matoba-san talking about some of the complaints he'd had from over his head.

But complaints or no complaints, I had never wanted to make profit my one and only motive, to do whatever made a buck. Even if the Japanese government thought that made me a naïve child.

And yet... In fact, exactly for that reason, the government, irked that things weren't going its way, must have decided to cut me loose and replace me with somebody else.

From the start, cultural invasion had been Japan's goal. In other words,

now Amutech was doing exactly what the government had hoped.

Ayasaki Hikaru.

He was—

"We're purveyors of *merchandise*. What's right is what sells, and the more it sells, the more right it is. The Japanese government is paying our salaries, remember. This isn't our hobby or our pastime. It's our job."

I was silent.

"It's not like we're doing anything illegal. Or immoral, for that matter. I've just found my own way to help ensure that Amutech generates profits as efficiently as possible."

He sounded so proud of himself.

And as for me, I didn't have a comeback.

Chapter Three: Cornered?

Petralka was in excellent spirits.

“Ah, we understand now...!”

How do I put this? She looked... different.

Petralka had always looked like a young but well-manicured, attractive girl. But her clothes, position, and behavior had worked together to create the *presence* that was Petralka an Eldant III.

And so just by wearing different colors, different materials, she became like a totally new person.

“Oh ho!”

She was currently dressed in a Suiren outfit like Hikaru-san had worn at their first meeting. Of course, Hikaru-san’s costume would never have fit the empress; this was a new outfit he’d made especially for Petralka. Minori-san had already requisitioned a sewing machine back when we were doing costumes for our movie, so it was just a matter of getting some cloth and using it with the lace Hikaru-san had brought along. Add some fasteners to make it easy to get in and out of, some buttons, and a few other little details, and *voila*.

What was more, Petralka had taken off her crown and replaced it with a black wig, making her look even more different. She hadn’t gone so far as to wear color contacts, though, so her eyes were still their usual emerald green.

She looked... Well, she looked like a girl you could just fall in love with.

An old saying holds that one tires of a beautiful woman after three days, and it was true that I had kind of gotten used to the way Petralka looked—but the impression she made now was fresh and new, and inspired my heart to pound all over again.

“Wonderful!”

“I receive your words of praise with utmost gratitude,” said Hikaru-san, standing next to me on the carpet of the audience chamber.

Hikaru-san, Minori-san, and I were Amutech’s representatives in the

audience hall at that moment. For the Eldant side there were Petralka and Garius. Royal guards waited just beyond the door, but inside, it was only us.

As ever, Hikaru-san blended perfectly into this environment. It went beyond simple etiquette; it was a matter of the ability to communicate. It was like he could choose his words and behavior in response to the way the other person looked and acted. Maybe it was a skill he had picked up from cosplaying. Dressing up just for your own amusement was one thing, but if you were going to be around other people, then you would have to branch out.

Maybe that was one way in which he was genuinely different from me. I really would have to learn from him on that point.

"Does it look good?" Petralka asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty, it suits you wonderfully," Hikaru-san answered.

This was hardly flattery—it was the simple truth.

But when Petralka asked the question again—"Does it look good?"—it took me a good ten seconds to realize she was talking to me.

"Huh? Oh, s-sorry, were you asking me?"

"Who else would we be asking?" Petralka frowned.

"S-Sorry about that. Of course, it looks great."

"You make it sound like an afterthought. You truly are uncouth, Shinichi. Don't you think so, Hikaru?"

"I thought perhaps he was struck dumb by your beauty, Majesty."

"We hardly share your supposition. Did you know, the first time we met, he took one look at me and immediately—"

"I told you, I'm sorry about that!" I said, with no choice but to apologize yet again.

I stole a sidelong glance at Hikaru-san, who was smirking. Then he said, "Your Majesty. As it happens, there is one more thing I wish to present to you." He gave another respectful bow.

"Oh? The costume of another character?"

"No..." He pulled something out of his bag. "It's this."

"Hrm? What's this?" Petralka leaned from her throne to see what Hikaru-san was holding out. It was...

"A card, Your Majesty. A trading card, of the kind we've been experimenting with selling among the common people. The cards themselves are imported from Japan, but we've assigned an artist to redo

the packaging here in Eldant."

"So we've heard. Your little spy friend from Bahairam, as we understand." A wry grin passed over her face.

Petralka was well aware at this point that Elvia really was a spy for Bahairam (although by now, she was more of a double agent). Petralka also knew, however, that Elvia wasn't very committed to her job, and that she had played a big role in rescuing me when I had been kidnapped by the other nation.

Hence the Eldant Empire was inclined to wink at her, and "the spy girl from Bahairam" had become something of a tongue-in-cheek nickname.

But even so, Elvia was who she was. She would absolutely never be allowed in this audience chamber.

"This is a card for which I asked our artist to attempt a brand-new illustration."

"Hmm?"

"It's an extremely rare, made-in-Eldant trading card—in fact, this is the only one that exists so far. The game that's so popular right now is called *Yugi WAR*, and we based the design on that."

"Oh ho!" Petralka leaned forward. "We cannot see it from so far away. Approach us."

"Yes, Majesty."

Hikaru-san came up to the throne as ordered. I caught a glimpse of the card in his hand as he went by. It was—

"This is—!"

Petralka was surprised, and even Garius, leaning in to look from beside her, raised an eyebrow.

"Is this Her Majesty?"

"I'm so happy you see the resemblance," Hikaru-san said.

Yep: the illustration on the card was done in an anime/manga style, but it was clearly a picture of Petralka. Not in her current cosplay outfit, but in her usual clothes and her crown, and with silver hair. The illustration was hardly photo-real, but all the distinctive characteristics made it impossible to mistake the person in the picture.

HP 9999
Petralka an Eldant III

“The spy girl of Bahairam drew this?”

“She did. Does it not radiate reverence for Your Majesty?” Hikaru-san said with a smile.

“Hmm...”

“The pilot period for the trading cards is already over. We intend to sell them on a larger scale going forward but are aware that among the nobility, many may not look favorably on packaging drawn by Elvia Harneiman. You can see from this drawing, however, how much she respects Your Majesty. Please let it show you her esteem for this empire, and proof that she has no rebellious feelings.”

“Hrm...”

Petralka and Garius looked at each other.

Back during the movie production, Petralka and Elvia had even shared a changing room, so truthfully, I didn’t think Petralka actually had that bad an impression of the beast girl. The only thing was, however the empress might feel, the people around her wouldn’t necessarily share her sentiments. Hikaru-san was right: there were many who wouldn’t smile on a spy from Bahairam doing the art for the packaging of merchandise that was spreading all over Eldant.

If she had Petralka and Garius’s backing, though, it might be a different story. Hikaru-san, I was sure, had deliberately asked Elvia to do Petralka’s picture on a card for exactly that reason. If the empress and her closest advisors were to trumpet the girl’s work, the other nobles wouldn’t be so keen to speak out against her.

All I could do was sigh. Hikaru-san really was an expert reader of other people’s feelings, or their psychology or something. In that sense, he was certainly talented.

“Shinichi,” Petralka said after a moment.

I looked up in a hurry. “Er, yes?”

“What is the matter? You’ve looked rather pale for some time...”

“Oh, uh, I’m fine, I promise.” I shook my head and waved both my hands to emphasize my point.

Outwardly, it wasn't as if anything had changed. There were no special problems in my work or my life—everything was going smoothly. Almost *too* smoothly. In fact, since entrusting some of the classes and business to Hikaru-san, I found myself with a little free time and could actually relax.

I suppose I should have been happy. But instead...

We were between classes at school, and I was wandering aimlessly down the hallway.

What Hikaru-san was attempting was a fresh cultural invasion. At the very least, that was the hope of the Japanese government, which had sent him here.

But just like what they had tried to do with me, there was no easy definition: "*this* plus *that* equals cultural invasion." It wasn't a simple matter of the supplier of culture causing a change in the receiver of it.

I had determined to dodge the "invasion" by giving the choice to the Eldant Empire. I was just making suggestions. It was up to Eldant whether they would listen to me, and later, by taking over the supply, it would be a matter of not cultural invasion but commercial transaction—Amutech would be doing exactly what it had always claimed it would do. That was the answer I came up with.

But now Hikaru-san had found the loopholes in what Amutech was doing and had begun an experiment in cultural invasion. By controlling supply and creating a unique set of values, he wanted to create both scarcity and a secure market. To a certain extent, that happened naturally with trading cards—hence why an experiment aimed not just at making money, but creating addicts, threatened to produce such a deleterious effect.

The people of Eldant had no defense, so to speak, against this sort of thing, so it proved immensely effective.

I had to stop it, or so I felt. But at first glance, what Hikaru-san was doing was not so different from what I had decided to do. Not on a practical level, anyway. The difference was in how Hikaru-san and I thought about what we were doing; it wasn't something you could see with the naked eye. And so, even if I wanted to stop Hikaru-san's trading card strategy, it would be hard to gain the support of those around me.

Meanwhile, everyone who met Hikaru-san increasingly thought of him as highly capable. And what that meant for me was...

"Um..."

As I stood there lost in these dark ruminations, someone called out to me.

I looked up and saw a woman standing in the hallway. She was young—she looked to be about Minori-san's age—but then I saw her pointed ears and realized she was an elf. That meant she might be far older than she appeared. Her clothing marked her out as different from the elf students; her outfit was full of lovely little details and gave off a more mature vibe. She was probably related to one of the students—somebody's mother, maybe.

"Are you Shinichi-sensei?"

"Huh? Er, yes. I'm Kanou Shinichi..."

"I'm glad to meet you. I'm Shade's mother. Thank you for taking such good care of my son." She bowed her head politely.

Very motherly-looking. And I recognized Shade's name. He hung around with Loek a lot. He always seemed kind of shy, but he must have been focused, because he kept up pretty good grades.

"Well, it's a pleasure to meet you." This was an older woman I was dealing with—I had to remember my manners. I bowed in return.

Shade's mother's expression darkened. "Please pardon me for bringing this up so suddenly, but there's something I'd like to talk to you about."

"There is?" I asked, furrowing my brow, and the woman nodded.

Every once in a while, the parents of a student would try to get a younger sibling admitted to the school on the basis that their older brother or sister already went here—you know, trying to work their connections. But it didn't look like that was what was going on here.

So what was?

"It's about my son."

Well, yes, I figured that.

"He hardly comes out of his room."

I took a breath. "Yipes..." For me personally, it seemed like this might be a painful conversation.

As someone who had spent some time as a home security guard, this subject really struck home. According to Shade's mother, he would just shut himself up in his room, and even when she tried to talk to him, he only gave vague, noncommittal answers.

When he finally did come out of his room to, you know, take care of business, she peeked in and found a portable game console sitting on, a

Nindento 3TS.

That's right: one of the prizes we had handed out at the soccer tournament.

The tournament had culminated in an all-out battle between some royal knights and the lizardman team. We had given the lizardmen Somy PLPs and 3TSes as prices, but because portable game consoles didn't mean much to them, they had sold most of them, many ending up in the hands of nobility—including some of the students' parents.

I assumed Shade's 3TS was one of those. And that wasn't a problem, as far as it went. The problem was...

"No matter what I say to him, he won't come out of his room. Finally he just says, 'Cram it, Mom!'"

"Gosh..."

Now that I thought about it, I realized I hadn't seen Shade in a while.

"My boy never used to act like that," Shade's mother said, clearly at a loss.

"Hmm..."

Had the games we'd brought over for the 3TS been that addictive?

In any event, if the 3TS really was the cause, then I bore some of the responsibility for this situation.

"I understand," I said. As a former shut-in, I had a sense of how he must be feeling. Maybe I could help him get back to a normal life. "Er, if I come to your house, I'll be able to find Shade-kun, then?"

"Oh, no, he's here at school now."

"I'm sorry?"

"He does come to school every day," Shade's mother said, her eyes on the ground. "It's just... the rest of the time, he never leaves his room..."

Ahh. Now it made sense. I got it.

The 3TS was battery-powered, but it couldn't run several days on a charge. If you did nothing but play it, you would probably need to recharge it on a daily basis. And right now, the only place the average person could get access to electric power was this school. He was coming to school to charge his game.

"But where is he, then?"

I really *hadn't* seen Shade lately.

So he was at school, but not in class? That would have to mean...

“Okay, I understand. I’ll need to hear Shade-kun’s side of the story first.”

“Thank you for taking care of this,” his mother said, and gave me a deep bow.

Saying I would look into it was easy enough, but that was only the beginning of the problem.

I left teaching duties to Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and Myusel, who was there to lecture that day, and started searching the school. Shade obviously wasn’t in the classroom, but I also didn’t find him in the library or even the storeroom.

“Where could he be...?”

I’d looked in just about every room we had, but I hadn’t seen him anywhere. What was going on?

Mentally scratching my head, I decided to take another look in the places I’d already checked. Maybe I’d missed something. And I had told his mother I would deal with this—I couldn’t just give up.

And so at the break period, I came up to a bunch of elf students laughing and chatting in the classroom.

“Hey, do any of you know where Shade is?”

“Shade?” They all looked at each other. “Now that you mention it, he hasn’t been around lately, has he?”

“What? I saw him,” a girl said.

“Me too,” said a guy. At least I had a couple of leads.

“Where did you see him?” I asked. The two students put their hands to their chins as if trying to remember.

“Uhh... In the classroom.”

“He charges his 3TS every day. But he disappears before class starts.”

“He was charging earlier, too. Although then he left...”

“Really?” This was bad. I must have missed him. “Do you know where he went?”

“Sorry, we really don’t...”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Then I left the classroom, too.

If he had been here until just a little while ago, that strongly suggested he was still on school grounds. He had probably shut himself up somewhere he could play his game without being interrupted, and he would reappear in the classroom when he needed a recharge.

“If I wanted to play a game by myself here at school...”

It wasn’t like all the kids had 3TSes. If you were careless enough to pull it out in the classroom, another student might grab it from you, or at least bother you when you were trying to play. That was why Shade charged in the classroom, but didn’t stay there.

Where could you be alone at school? By yourself...

“Hmmm...”

I walked down the hallway—then stopped at the one place I could think of.

The boys’ bathroom.

The foundations and exterior of this building had been built in the style of the Holy Eldant Empire, but the interior had been designed and built by the JSDF, so the place was pretty Japanese. Apparently the Eldant Empire didn’t separate men’s and women’s toilet areas, but things were different here at school.

And just like in Japan, there were individual stalls in the restroom. You could flip down the lids on the Western-style toilets to make an impromptu chair. For a while in Japan, the expression *benjo-meshi* had gained currency—a devastatingly sad phrase that meant “toilet meal” and referred to eating by yourself in a bathroom stall. Frankly, playing a game in the restroom was probably more attractive than eating your lunch in there. Heck, I had been known to take a manga with me, myself. Though you always had to watch out for the danger of your legs falling asleep...

I entered the boys’ bathroom and looked around. No one else was immediately visible. But, as if we were following the script from a TV show or something, the door of just one of the stalls was shut.

I approached and knocked on the door. “Excuse me. Is that Shade in there by any chance?” I wanted to be very sure I had the right person.

I waited. Ten seconds passed. No answer.

I knocked on the door again, but to no avail. Instead, I could hear someone muttering inside.

“Ahh... Myuul-tan...” The voice was so quiet it was almost a whisper.

“Shade...?” I asked, pressing my ear to the door.

“Myuul-tan, your... Your...”

The voice was hard to hear, but I was pretty sure it was Shade.

“Shade! That’s you, isn’t it? It’s me, Kanou Shinichi. I want you to open the door.”

I realized I sounded like a police officer trying to talk down a suspect. Oops. Anyway, I knocked on the door again, harder this time. But still there was no answer. All I could hear was a strained laugh and harsh breathing.

Uh-oh, I thought reflexively. This didn’t seem... quite normal.

“Sorry!” I said, then I placed my hand against the door. The next words that came out of my mouth were a magical chant. A spell Myusel had taught me, one of only two I knew.

“*Tifu Murottsu!*”

Bam!

A whirlwind flared up right there, the wind blowing my hair every which way. My spell slammed the door with an invisible force, and with a *crack* of protest the lock came free. I pulled the door open.

There, in his own personal “cave of the sun goddess,” was Shade...

“Myul-taaan...”

...but not the Shade I knew.

He didn’t show a hint of surprise at my sudden entrance, and he was missing the shy smile he’d always had. Instead, a weak grin covered his haggard face, and he just kept staring at the screen of his 3TS.

I was panicked. How could I not be, after seeing Shade that way? I had tried to talk to him, but he was completely fixated on his 3TS, and hardly even seemed to hear what I was saying. In the end, I was at least able to get him home, but not much more. I thought about taking the 3TS away, but decided not to, in case it made him turn violent.

He was completely addicted. What was worse, the thing he was addicted to was *not* a game I had imported. It was an ero game. I.e., an X-rated title.

Of course, the Holy Eldant Empire didn’t technically have an “X

rating," and I had imported ero games before, albeit only a few of them.

Personally, I don't think ero games are inherently evil or anything. Thanks to my mom's work, our house had a rotating selection of samples of such games, and I wasn't above checking them out when I thought my parents wouldn't notice. So I didn't think the problem was with it being an ero game as such.

The problem had to do with the content of the game—its type, if you will.

The word "game" actually covers a wide variety of things. Ero games fall under this category, but so do adventure games, visual novels, and kamishibai games. Players face a choice in each location that can have some effect on the story, although in its most basic form the plot is already settled, just like in a manga, anime, or novel.

To put it another way, if you just follow along, you'll get to the end. If you decided to do nothing but play such a game, no matter how slow you took it, you could probably get through one in about three days. Despite a certain degree of freedom in such titles, they're not really that different from manga, anime, or novels.

What I'm saying is: eventually, they end.

But there are also games that don't have an "end." Ones you can play over and over, as many times as you want, or ones whose content changes in some way based on a random number; some others you can play for ages if you want, and so on. A lot of online games are like that, but so are a lot of single-player games.

There are plenty of ero games like that, too. Games where you can choose what the heroine's face and body look like, and where her spoken lines are chosen randomly from a large pool of possibilities. There's a lot of replay value to be had in something like that—in fact, the play itself is often a series of lengthy loops.

In a word, you could spend an endless amount of time with an ideal woman you designed yourself and never have to come back to reality. In fact, it was all too easy to get so sucked in that you started to think, *Who wants to play a crappy game like reality, anyway?*

Now, as I've mentioned before, the people of the Holy Eldant Empire seemed especially susceptible to otaku culture. And any time you get too into something, whatever it is, there can be strange side effects. If those side

effects cause real harm, then naturally people will criticize whatever the thing was that you were into. And if that thing happens to be ero games—i.e., the sort of thing widely considered depraved entertainment—then people are really going to be up in arms about it. And if people's criticism started to extend from the game to the people who had *brought* the game—Amutech—we could have genuine hysteria on our hands. This was a slippery slope I'd already had too much firsthand experience of with the Assembly of Patriots.

Early on, I realized that some of the first things I'd imported had been mistakes, and ever since then, I had steered completely clear of importing any ero games. I figured those could come later, after otaku culture had become more normal here.

So then, who?

Someone on the Japanese side, obviously. And that meant one of a fairly limited number of people. Me, Minori-san, Matoba-san, Hikaru-san, and a handful of JSDF soldiers.

Minori-san was importing her share of BL books, but those were for her personal interest—notwithstanding the pleasure she took in showing them to Garius. I couldn't picture her importing ero games to sell to the kids over here.

Matoba-san, then? I didn't think so. He barely knew the first thing about otaku entertainment. It was entirely possible he didn't even realize ero games existed. He hadn't known what an "ero game triple threat" even was before he met me.

What about the soldiers from the garrison? I couldn't be sure. They did get those regular deliveries of personal items, and I wouldn't have been surprised to find out there were X-rated games in some of those boxes. But...

"...Huh?"

Thinking of those deliveries spurred a memory in me.

Hikaru-san's delivery.

The memory cards I'd seen packed into that box.

"Now it makes sense..."

How would you get ero games for consoles like the PLP or the 3TS? You couldn't do it with official cartridges or optical discs. Neither Somy nor Nindento wanted X-rated titles on their systems. There were no official

ero releases for either console.

But modern handheld games had cameras and music players and such, along with memory card slots to hold the data for those functions. Games you downloaded could be stored on memory cards, too. If you used a PC to create a program and put it on one of those cards, you could essentially have a "doujin" ero game on PLP or 3TS. What if that was what Hikaru-san had wanted all those memory cards for?

"Bad... This is bad," I muttered as I headed back toward the classroom.

The image of Shade, wearing a zombified expression and clinging to his 3TS, was burned into my memory. However you sliced it, that wasn't normal. I'd heard stories of some people who had done nothing but played online games for days on end until they finally died—and it looked like Shade was heading down that path.

Ero games also naturally lend themselves to, uh, certain behavior while playing. While playing *all night*, if you know what I mean. I read about an experiment once where *supposedly*, they taught a monkey to pleasure itself, and the monkey just kept doing it until it collapsed. In the same way, when you have something that isn't limited, and where there's no outside pressure condemning it as "bad" or "shameful," then it can be impossible to stop.

The result? If enough of these games made it into the hands of enough students, at least one of them was bound to just keep playing until he dropped. Just like how my students had gotten completely hooked on otaku culture because they had been starved for entertainment, it can be hard to control what you're not used to.

I couldn't let things get like that again.

"Damn. I should have stopped him earlier," I groaned.

Him, of course, was Hikaru-san.

"But how should I do this?"

I wandered through the school, looking for Hikaru-san. We were past the point of "seeing how things went." Trading cards were one thing, but I wasn't going to let him get away with telling me that the ero games were just about business.

Finally, I spotted Hikaru-san through the window of the classroom.

"Hikaru-sa—"

I opened the door of the classroom with a mind to corner him about the games, but then I stopped in my tracks.

Hikaru-san looked like he was having so much fun. He stood in the classroom surrounded by students, chatting amiably with them. Myusel and Minori-san were beside him. I didn't know what they were talking about, but everyone seemed really into it.

Everyone seemed to be... enjoying themselves. So much so that I, who had come to give Hikaru-san a piece of my mind, actually felt alienated. I hesitated to shatter the convivial atmosphere.

What did I think would happen if I confronted Hikaru-san about his behavior here and now? The students adored him, and even Petralka seemed to like him. Myusel, Elvia, and Minori-san all enjoyed talking about cosplay with him. If someone were to criticize Hikaru-san, wasn't it likely that there would be somebody who took his side?

A new spear tip for the cultural invasion, sent to replace me...

In other words, a new person who could and would undermine me. If I set myself up against Hikaru-san, whose side would everybody take? That of the former shut-in and worthless otaku who was prone to saying things that invited misunderstanding? Or Hikaru-san, who was intelligent, beautiful, and a superb communicator?

I stood there in thought.

I felt pathetic—but I got scared.

I was scared they would say, "Kanou Shinichi, we don't need you anymore."

I was so scared, I found I couldn't move from my spot.

"Master?" Myusel noticed me at the door and smiled. "Is something wrong?"

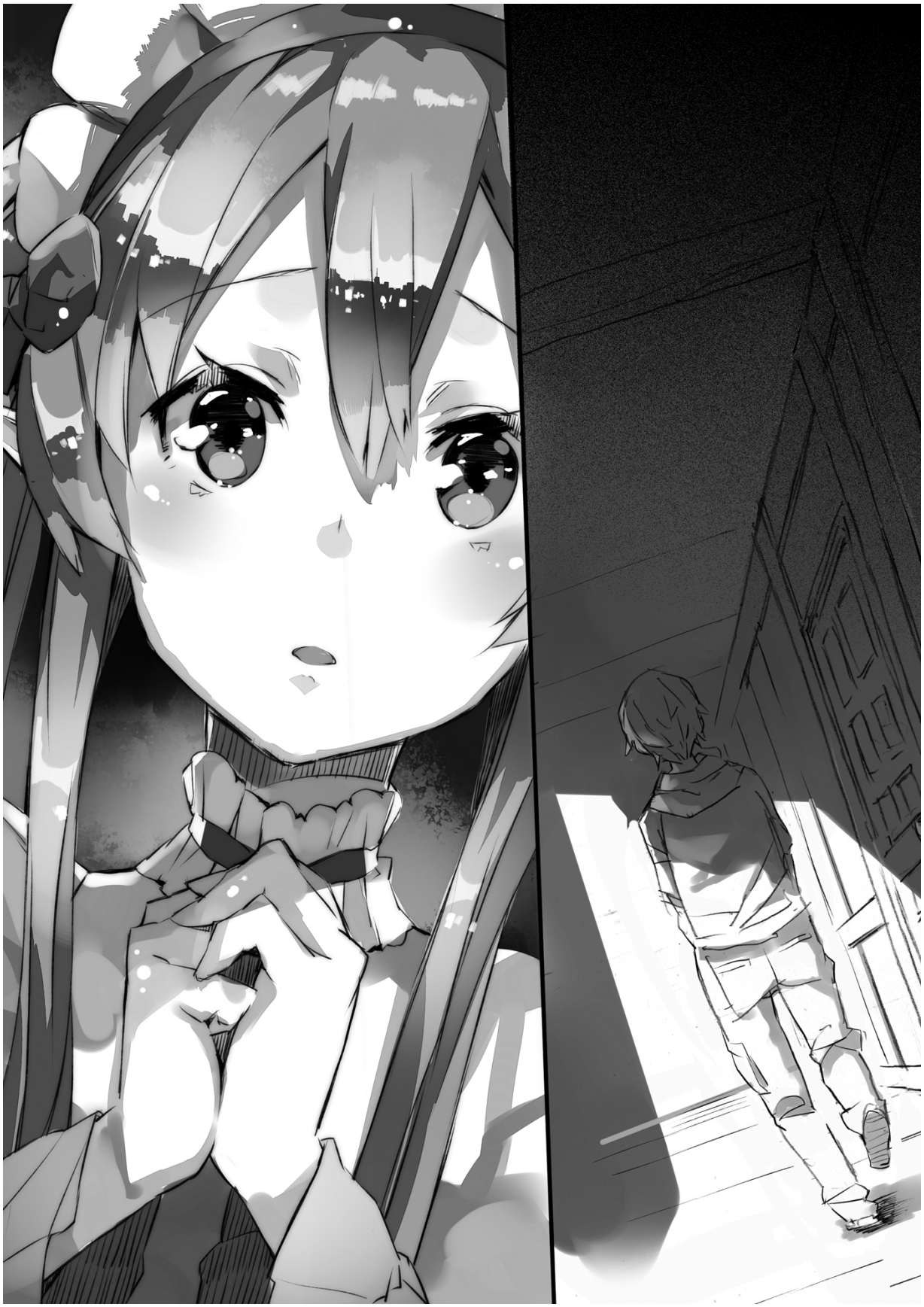
Her words caused everyone else in the room to stop talking and look at me. I couldn't shake the feeling that they resented me for interrupting just when they had been chatting so happily—even though I knew how unlikely that was—and it killed me.

So I said...

"Er, no, nothing really..." I gave a reflexive shake of my head and promptly exited the classroom.

"Master?"

Myusel's voice, sounding doubtful, followed me—but I just couldn't stay there any longer.



We were back at the mansion for that short stretch between school and dinner.

Minori-san had gone to her room, and I saw Myusel head into the kitchen, so I talked to Hikaru-san in the hallway. Minori-san, supposedly my bodyguard, was all but attached at the hip to Hikaru-san these days, so I didn't get a lot of chances to speak to him alone.

"Hikaru-san," I said.

He turned to me with a smile. "Yes? What is it?"

I had what I thought was a pretty serious expression on my face, but Hikaru-san never let his smile slip. Was he just not worried? Or did he imagine that I would never attack him?

I felt like the ant challenging the elephant. In a toe-to-toe fight with Hikaru-san, I could never win, and somewhere in my mind I had the feeling of self-loathing that comes with having given up before you ever started.

But all the same...

"I just wanted to talk to you for a minute," I said after a few seconds' hesitation, as coldly as I could. "What is that 3TS game?"

"What? I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't act dumb," I ordered him in a voice dangerously close to breaking. "You're the one who gave Shade a memory card with a homebrew ero game on it, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry. I truly have no idea—"

"I said, don't play with me!" I broke in. "I saw all those memory cards in your box the other day. You meant to use those to sell ero games, didn't you? Otherwise, why would you need to buy so many of the same card? You have the game on your own computer, and you're copying it to those cards for distribution, aren't you?"

Hikaru-san was completely silent. Slowly, an inch at a time, the smile disappeared from that lovely face.

Staring—no, glaring—into my eyes, he shrugged his shoulders. "So? What if I am?" He didn't look the least bit perturbed. In fact, he put his hands defiantly on his hips and sighed as he looked at me, as if to indicate

how much of a pain in the neck this had all become.

"Then I want you to stop right away."

"Why?" His voice was so calm, so even. "Don't you see how much everyone is enjoying themselves?"

"Hold on a second. 'Everyone'...?"

Not just Shade, then? Think about it: I only learned about Shade because his mother came and talked to me. I hadn't noticed on my own. Between the varying classes of students, from noble to commoner, as well as the frequent fights that broke out in the classroom, it wasn't that unusual to go several days without seeing a given student. Unlike in Japan with its long-established system of compulsory education, people around here didn't necessarily feel that it was such a bad thing to miss a few days of school.

But what if a lot of those missing students were out for the same reason as Shade?

"How many are out there?!"

"I sold ten. We're still at the pilot stage," Hikaru-san said.

"Ten!"

"Looks like they're hooked, too. Starting the day after I sold the games, out of those ten students, six have only shown up at the classroom when they need to recharge their batteries. Though admittedly the other four have continued to attend class as usual."

That was still more than half the students gone, a spectacular rate of addiction.

"This is bad. You can't do things like that."

Shade's health was obviously suffering, but even so, he refused to give up his 3TS.

As I mentioned, the game he was playing was one with a vast degree of replayability. It was possible to be finished with a story-based game once you had seen the story, even accounting for games that had branching paths and multiple endings. But games that emphasized simulation elements often didn't have endings. You could design a character the way you liked her, then go on fake dates and have fake hanky-panky, and the more you indulged in this stuff, the more new images of your character you could unlock.

It was easy to see how this could turn endless.

"Games like that shouldn't be..."

“You imported ero games yourself, didn’t you?” Hikaru-san said with a smile. “Are you eighteen? I don’t think so.”

“But—But that—”

Okay, fair point—I wasn’t eighteen. Maybe I shouldn’t be trumpeting the fact that I had played X-rated games. But...

“I just want everyone to have fun—I simply asked myself what everyone would most enjoy, and that’s why I imported those games. And because they’re just data, there isn’t even a need to physically transport them through the wormhole, unlike manga, or anime DVDs. I start by selling blank memory cards, and then sell the data later. The games are simple to duplicate on my computer. Can you think of a better business model?”

“Business model? You can only call it that because you didn’t see Shade!”

“See him? See him how? You mean see how he’s so entranced by that game that he’s destroyed his own health, like a monkey who’s learned to jack off?”

“Then you know?!”

“I can guess easily enough.” Hikaru-san shrugged.

“Don’t tell me... You knew that might happen to people, and you still —?”

“Take a population that’s not used to this kind of stimulus, and dump all-you-can-play ero games on them. What do you think’s going to happen?”

I couldn’t say anything. He was right. It was true.

Back when I had first begun importing otaku products, hadn’t it been the same way?

When you have someone who’s never been exposed to a given stimulus, even a relatively mild version of that stimulus can be extremely potent—so much so that when you take it away, it produces withdrawal symptoms. But at least with typical manga, novels, and anime, you could look at them once and be done with them. They didn’t suck away your life force, like ero games.

“So you did this knowingly?”

“Of course I did. It was an experiment, and these are exactly the results I expected,” Hikaru-san replied without a trace of guilt.

“So the experiment’s over, then. Ero games—”

“—have been a huge success,” Hikaru-san said. “We’re seeing an addiction rate of over fifty percent. That speaks well for future sales.”

God. He really saw this as nothing but a business matter, didn’t he? It just has to sell. What sells is what’s right.

“We’re not talking about sales anymore! And the same with the cards!”

“The cards?”

“People aren’t just *enjoying* them anymore!”

Some cards were going for prices that weren’t even funny. An actual secondhand market was forming here, albeit on a small scale.

“We need to wrap up this operation and just leave our hands off for a while!” I said.

“Why?” Hikaru-san looked genuinely puzzled. “People are having fun. Amutech’s business is booming. To a limited extent, even Japan itself is feeling the effect. And that means our reputations are on the rise, too. Where’s the problem? Do you really want to give all that up? Why would you?”

“*You!* Do you really think of nothing but sales numbers? Nothing but money?!”

“And just what else am I supposed to think of?!” I must have touched a nerve, because suddenly Hikaru-san didn’t sound so calm anymore. “How do you think entertainment works? How do you think the otaku industry works?! Consumers are nothing but swine who’ll throw themselves at the first thing that flashes a bit of skin at them! What’s wrong with giving them what they want?! They don’t give a rat’s ass about stories—just sex, sex, sex!”

I was left speechless by this sudden storm. I couldn’t understand Hikaru-san’s scathing tone. It was almost as if he was belittling otaku, despite being one himself. Had familiarity bred such contempt?

Or could it be that this person, Ayasaki Hikaru, wasn’t an otaku at all? That it was hatred for otaku that drove him to say these things? It wasn’t as if otaku were the only people in the world who read manga, or watched anime, or whatever. Hikaru-san had said his parents were both otaku. Was it simple exposure that had given him his knowledge of otaku works...?

“As sellers of goods, what’s wrong with bringing in what consumers want?! Or what? Are you going to tell me companies are wrong for even making those products?!”

“No— I don’t mean—”

That wasn’t what I was trying to say at all. But I didn’t know how to put it into words.

Hikaru-san looked at me as I stood there, unable to say anything, and the edges of his lips twisted. “Hmph.” He looked at me out of the corner of narrowed eyes, mockingly. “Exactly what do you think you’re playing at, anyway?”

“Huh...?”

“Being Amutech’s General Manager? Yes, of course that’s what you are. But for how much longer, do you think?”

“What are you—?”

“Have you *still* not figured out why I came here?”

“Wha...?”

What was he... talking about?

Hikaru-san put his face right next to mine. I instinctively twisted away a little bit, but he leaned down and whispered in my ear, as if sharing a secret. “I was the one who was chosen to replace you when you were gone.”

“When I *was*... gone...?”

What? Why the past tense?

“I was supposed be the second General Manager of Amutech. But then you had the gall to come back alive. So we quickly decided I would be your assistant instead. Did you really not notice any of this?”

I sucked in a breath. Hikaru-san stared into my face. He was still gorgeous, still could have passed for a woman, and he was inches away from me. But I didn’t feel my heart pounding. In fact, I could tell the blood had drained from my face. At that moment, I was a frog hypnotized by a snake.

“And when it comes right down to it, you’re not so special after all, are you? Just an otaku. Don’t you think someone with a head for business—someone like me—would make a better manager?” He giggled girlishly. “So we have you, who has hardly made any profit and even went rogue on one occasion. And we have me, someone who has achieved tangible, if experimental, results in a very short time. Which do you think the Japanese government would prefer?”

I didn’t answer. There was only one answer, anyway.

Hikaru-san.

When I had been kidnapped by the Kingdom of Bahairam, Japan had found Hikaru-san to send to replace me. It probably would have been better from the government's perspective if I had never come back at all. If they specifically tried to get rid of me, they risked poisoning their relationship with the Eldant Empire. But if I was eliminated by a convenient accident, something that the Japanese government appeared to have no hand in, than they would have every reason to send a replacement for me.

I'll bet there was rejoicing in Japan when they heard I had been kidnapped by Bahairam.

And then I'd come back. Thanks to Myusel and Elvia and Minori-san and Loek and Romilda, I had come home safely. And so the position of General Manager, which the government had intended to bestow upon Hikaru-san, vanished into thin air, and they were forced to send him as my assistant instead of my replacement.

After their experience with me, I assumed the government had carefully investigated Hikaru-san's temperament and personal philosophy. They would want to be sure he would do as they wished. After that, it would just be a matter of waiting for the right opportunity to usurp me.

If Petralka, Garius, and others like them came to value Hikaru-san more than me, then Amutech's leadership could be changed with no special fuss. That was why Matoba-san or somebody had gone out of their way to find out who Petralka's favorite character was and work it into their plans.

I stood silently, but my mind was flooded with images from the classroom. Hikaru-san surrounded by students, chatting happily. Were they so happy that even if I disappeared, they wouldn't mind having just Hikaru-san?

For that matter, if they were forced to choose between me and Hikaru-san, how many of them would actually take my side? Half of them? None of them?

That couldn't be true. I tried to deny it, but once the notion had gotten into my head, I couldn't get it out.

To my own humiliation, I realized I was shaking.

"Is that all you wanted to talk to me about?" Hikaru-san asked, smiling. Was it just me, or was that a smile of triumph?

Then Hikaru-san said, "I'm going to go relax in my room until dinner." He turned and began walking slowly away from me.

I couldn’t do anything but watch him go.

When dinner was over, I quickly retreated to my own room, unable to stand being in the same place as Hikaru-san.

I hadn’t had much appetite, and didn’t really touch my dinner. I felt bad for Myusel, who had worked so hard to make it, but I could hardly even remember what she had served. I recalled taking two or three mechanical bites, but I hadn’t tasted anything.

“Sigh.....”

How pathetic am I?

I flopped on my bed. I had no idea what to do.

In the past, when it had come to a fight with the Japanese government, I had found I was able to square off against them. Petralka, of course, and the entire Eldant Empire, had my back—and that gave me courage.

But now? Now, I wasn’t so sure.

The reality was, Hikaru-san wasn’t even technically my enemy. He was only thinking of how best to run Amutech to serve the interests of the Japanese government; he wasn’t specifically trying to get rid of me. If he had been, there would have been plenty of opportunities to take more concrete action. I probably wouldn’t even have been able to resist.

But Hikaru-san genuinely didn’t seem hostile toward me.

I don’t think he was actually concerned about me at all. It was just that as he worked harder and harder, I was eventually going to find myself cornered. That was all there was to it.

Given my official position, I didn’t have a lot of room to criticize what he was doing, even if I personally thought it was problematic.

“But what if I *wasn’t* General Manager anymore...?”

Just saying it aloud made the possibility seem a little more real.

Would the Japanese government kill me? No. However accepted Hikaru-san might become, I didn’t think they would be able to do anything as heavy-handed as murdering me. It would just hurt their standing with the Eldant Empire too much.

In that case, might they simply send me back to Japan as someone who

had no more business being here?

It was at that point that it dawned on me: *I could go back to Japan.*

When I first came over to Eldant, it was basically a kidnapping. And for confidentiality reasons I'd never been allowed to go back to Japan. I wondered sometimes if my parents might be worried about me, but then again, I thought there was a chance they were perfectly happy to have shed a worthless time-waster like me, and so I'd resolved not to think about it too hard.

.....Hey.

Don't do this to yourself. Don't let your thoughts go in these ugly directions.

I heaved another sigh.

That was when I heard a knock at the door.

Curious, I looked over, although I didn't bother dragging myself up off my bed. Honestly, I didn't have the energy to get up, or even to answer.

"Um... Master, are you there?" a cautious voice called out when I didn't say anything. "It's Myusel."

"Oh!" I reflexively jumped up. "Oh, uh, I'm here! You can come in!"

...Er, Kanou Shinichi? Weren't you just saying you didn't have the energy to get up or talk?

Disappointed by my own fickleness, I quickly straightened my clothes. As I did so, the doorknob turned slowly, hesitantly.

"Master... Shinichi-sama?"

In the narrow wedge of light between the open door and the wall, Myusel's face appeared. I nodded, and she pushed open the door and came in.

"What's up?" I asked.

She came in, all right, but once she closed the door behind her she stopped moving and just stood there. I watched her, but she seemed reluctant, looking at the ground and fidgeting slightly.

"Um... I... I know it might not be... my place to ask, but..." Her face was bright red, but then Myusel finally resolved herself and looked up at me. "Is... Is something the matter?"

"Huh...? Er, what makes you say that?"

I asked out of instinct, but in reality, it was a stupid question. Think about it: I'd barely touched the dinner she made before dashing off to my

room. Of course she would conclude I might not be feeling very well. Then again, Myusel was prone to assuming things were her fault—like that she had messed up the cooking or something—but let's ignore that for now.

"Y-You just haven't seemed very... happy lately, Shinichi-sama. Especially earlier. You looked like... like you were in so much pain..." She didn't look up as she spoke. Shyness drove the redness up to her ears.

I could only stare at Myusel. Notwithstanding tonight's meal, I thought I had been doing everything I could to act normal. And yet Myusel, it seemed, had seen right through me.

Then on top of that, she purposely came to my room just to check on me...

Uh-oh. It would be pretty embarrassing to start crying now.

"Myusel..." I blinked to hold back the tears, then looked at the maid. "Do you have a moment?"

I patted the bed beside me gently.

Myusel looked uncomprehending for an instant, then said, "C-Certainly...!" She made her way over to me a little bit awkwardly, then sat down where I had indicated with no small hesitation. She closed her eyes and put her hands in front of her chest almost as if she were praying.

After a second I said, "I want to ask you something."

"Me...?" She looked taken aback.

"Maybe I shouldn't. But... I want to talk, or at least to be heard. That's all I need."

"Er, ah, b-but, y-yes, certainly, of course you can!" Myusel nodded vigorously, looking strangely out of sorts.

What was going on? She was even more red than before... But anyway.

"To tell the truth..."

And then I told Myusel about everything I had felt from the day Hikaru-san arrived until now. About the trading cards. About the ero games. About the Japanese government's philosophy, and Hikaru-san's.

I did worry that speaking ill of Hikaru-san might cause Myusel to become disillusioned with me. But if so, I felt that might help me accept that I had been wrong. It was sort of like when I had decided to rebel against the government—Myusel seemed to me like a bellwether of this world, and how she felt set something of a standard for me.

Everything I had thought and felt, I spilled out to Myusel.

When it came to explaining what an “ero game” was and what had happened to Shade, she once again blushed with embarrassment, but nonetheless listened to me all the way through. As I spoke, I couldn’t tell what she might be thinking, but she at least had the good grace to hear me out, even if my talk was approaching babble.

When I finished, she said, “So Hikaru-sama...” She looked shocked. Then, suddenly, it seemed like something had clicked into place for her. She put a hand to her mouth and said, “Oh...”

“What is it?”

“Now that you mention it... I just...”

After a moment’s hesitation, Myusel came out with it. “When you were taken hostage by the Kingdom of Bahairam, Shinichi-sama, I thought it almost seemed like the Ja-panese government had expected you to be captured all along...”

“Ahh. So that’s how it was.”

I sighed. Apparently I had been carried off by Bahairam because my own government had leaked the information that caused them to take an interest in me. That suggested my replacement, Hikaru-san, had been waiting in the wings since even before then. Maybe since... immediately after my rebellion against the government.

No doubt they’d wanted their second general manager to be someone who would follow their wishes more closely. And that was why...

I sat, silent. I remembered the way Hikaru-san had lambasted otaku as only someone who grew up among them could.

The government had really hit the jackpot with him. He had all the otaku knowledge, but basically despised otaku as consumers. Hence he would have no qualms about using otaku products or works as tools of cultural invasion—might even enjoy using them to cause consumers to dance in the palm of his hand.

It was ugly. Hideous. But hadn’t he succeeded in gaining everyone’s trust? At least, it looked to me like he had.

I was just an otaku. What was I going to do—twiddle my thumbs and watch him? If I wasn’t careful, then in trying to resist him I could find myself doing the exact same thing he was. Battling over profits. Taking what sells to be what’s right. And then, I would be just like him.

So, then... What to do?

“What should I do...?”

I had told Myusel I just need someone to listen to me, but this is where I’d wound up. It probably made me look pretty weak, but to be honest, I probably didn’t care.

“Maybe you guys don’t even need me here anymore...”

“That isn’t true!” Myusel exclaimed, almost as if to wipe out my words with her own. Then, more quietly, “Er, I... I mean, pardon me...” She looked at the floor, shrinking again in the light of my shocked silence.

The words had come out instinctively, without careful thought. But that only went to show that they were her true feelings.

“I don’t... I don’t understand these difficult or complicated things,” Myusel began, sounding hesitant once again. “I don’t even really know whether what Hikaru-sama is doing is right or wrong. But Shinichi-sama, to me... to me, you’re a very important person. We absolutely do need you here. Otherwise... why would Minori-sama, and Loek-sama, and Romilda-sama go all the way to Bahairam to rescue you...?” She squeezed her knees with her hands. “Even Her Majesty did what she could... And Elvia-san, it took a little while, but she threw herself into helping you...”

There was a long pause before I replied, “I see. You’re right. I’m sorry.” I really meant it.

She *was* right. Even if I was evicted from the position of General Manager of Amutech, that didn’t mean everyone would immediately hate me or something. This wasn’t a binary question: one or zero, enemy or friend. That kind of thinking only constrained what you could see. Just because people liked Hikaru-san didn’t mean they automatically disliked me.

Had I felt so totally cornered that I’d lost sight of even something as simple as that? How embarrassing...

“And... if it turns out Hikaru-sama is your enemy, Shinichi-sama, then... then even if perchance Minori-sama, Elvia-san—and even Her Majesty—if they all side with Hikaru-sama, I’ll still...” Myusel looked at me, almost beseeching. And here I’d thought I was the one who needed encouragement. “I’ll still stand by you, Shinichi-sama. That’s one thing that will never change.”

The way she spoke, it was almost as if she was begging me to let her be my ally.

Oh!

I could feel a fluttering in the depths of my heart. Yes: it was just like before. If Myusel was on my side, then I could and would fight.

"Myusel..." I opened my mouth, just... happy. Feelings are only meaningful if you tell the other person about them. "Thank you. Thank you so much." The words may have been stale, but I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Oh, er, n-not at all—I just..." It seemed like she couldn't figure out how to go on, either.

So Myusel and I sat there on the bed, both of us silent, until...

"I'm going to figure this out, somehow," I said. "I can't let things go on like this."

"Yes, sir. If there's any way I can help, please let me know."

"Sure thing. When the time comes, I'll tell you." Finally, I was at least able to muster a smile.

Guuuurrrrgle.

As if to prove that my energy had come back, there was an unmistakable growl from my stomach. Myusel and I both looked at each other for a second, then burst out laughing.

I guess I had my appetite back.

"I'll go make a nighttime snack for you."

"Thanks. I'll come to the dining area."

"Oh, no, I can bring it here to your room."

"Oh, gosh, you don't—I mean—" I scratched my cheek with one finger. "I sort of... wanted to go with you."

I just want to be with you for a while.

Naturally, I couldn't bring myself to put it quite that bluntly. As Myusel blinked away her surprise, I said, partly to cover my embarrassment, "Whatever you make, I hope it's good."

"It will be!" Myusel said, nodding and smiling broadly. Seriously, she was cute enough to make me fall over right then and there.

Later on...

What follows isn't from my perspective, but Myusel's. It takes place in the middle of the night, but she related the events to me after she woke me

up the next morning.

With that in mind...

“Um...” Myusel knocked twice on the door, then said, “Hikaru-sama, I’ve brought tea.”

“It’s open,” came the answer from inside. “Come in.”

Myusel excused herself and then pushed a cart with tea implements on it into Hikaru-san’s room. Hikaru-san apparently had some kind of habit of taking tea about three hours after dinner, and he had asked Myusel to bring it to him each day.

In his room, Hikaru-san was working on something on a personal laptop, but he closed it as if to hide whatever it was and turned to Myusel. “Thank you.”

“Not at all...”

This was also just as usual.

Myusel poured the tea and put it on Hikaru-san’s desk along with some tea candies. She tried hard not to disturb Hikaru-san when he was working —normally she would simply have pushed the cart back out of the room. But tonight...

“Um... Hikaru-sama?” She stood stock-still as she spoke.

“Yes? What is it?” Hikaru-san asked, looking at her.

“You always work until so late at night...” Myusel glanced at the laptop.

Hikaru-san always seemed to be doing something on that computer when she came in with tea. At that hour of the night, I would be reading manga or watching an anime in my room, and Minori-san, leaving bodyguard duties to the various security systems around the house, would probably be reading some kind of BL book or fujoshi-oriented doujinshi. It made Hikaru-san look like a bit of a workaholic.

“I hope I’m not overstepping myself, but... um... you should make sure to rest sometimes, for the sake of your health...”

Hikaru-san had closed the lid of the computer, so Myusel couldn’t see what he was doing. It was possible he was playing a game or something—but Hikaru-san’s expression didn’t look like someone who was relaxing.

“Well. I suppose you’re right.” A ghost of a smile passed over his face. “This is the only thing I’m good at. I just...”

“Wha...?” Myusel blinked at this unexpected declaration.

The whole reason she had spoken to Hikaru-san like this, unlike she usually did, was because after talking to me, she had started to wonder about the philosophy of this person, Ayasaki Hikaru... or something like that.

Myusel told me she couldn’t see Hikaru-san as a bad person. In fact, very much like me, he had been exceptionally kind to her and Elvia and Brooke and Cerise, regardless of whether they were mixed-bloods or demihumans or what have you.

Of course, that could have been part of some hidden agenda, but what was there to gain by being considerate of servants like Myusel? That was what made Myusel, at least, think that this was more than Machiavellian calculation.

Just like with me.

So if it was true that he was trying to chase me out—if that was true, then Myusel wanted to know what his thinking could be. And true enough, it was ultimately the Japanese government that was trying to get rid of me, not Ayasaki Hikaru himself.

When I thought about it, I could see that Hikaru-san had never gone out of his way to be hostile to me. He argued with me about the trading cards and the ero games, but that was only after I had started an argument with him.

“Surely you’re good at other things, too,” Myusel said, distraught. “Everyone thinks you’re really something, Hikaru-sama...”

“Yes, I imagine they do,” Hikaru-san said evenly. “That’s what I mean by the only thing I’m good at. Getting everyone to say how wonderful I am.”

Myusel fell silent, unsure what Hikaru-san was saying.

Hikaru-san looked at her, the slight smile returning to his face. “Listen.

In a word, I'm only interested in meeting the expectations of those around me, playing along with them... You could say it's the only thing I *can* have an interest in."

"Oh, uh, er... Is... Isn't that quite something in itself?" Wasn't it Hikaru-san's very talent that allowed him to respond to people that way?

But Hikaru-san shook his head and replied, "I'm a doll. I'm just like Suiren from *Rose Princess*. Empty. There's nothing I especially want to do. I have no particular dreams for the future. When I do what the people around me expect, then they're happy—so that's what I do, reflexively."

Hikaru-san said he was like a high-functioning machine: still, in the end, just a machine.

Myusel didn't fully understand this analogy, but Hikaru-san went on: "Like this time. Matoba-san—the whole Japanese government—they all have great expectations of me, and I just... you know? What I'm doing doesn't demand any special talent or ability. Anyone who's willing to put in enough effort could do it. So here I am, working away. That's all there is to it."

"Is that... Is that right?" Myusel didn't know quite what to say. All she could do was nod along.

Wasn't it a good thing to meet the expectations of others? Wasn't that supposed to be laudable? But here was Hikaru-san saying...

"I became so good at sensing what other people wanted that I... I didn't have much of a self anymore. Cosplay started as something that delighted my parents, and I kept doing it because so many people were so impressed by it." He shrugged.

"I... I'm not really smart enough to follow all this, but..." Myusel started. "Hikaru-sama, could it be that you... that you hate that about yourself?"

"I wonder," Hikaru-san said, the puzzled look coming across his face once again. And then he gave that doll-like, impenetrable, perfect smile and said, "I'm not really sure myself."

It was as if he was saying, *Dolls don't get to decide about things like that*.

The next day, Hikaru-san and I were abruptly summoned to Eldant Castle. Since we had already made our routine report, this was clearly about something different. The knights who had come to summon us seemed different from usual, too—stiffer, somehow. More severe.

What could be going on?

Even as these questions ran through my mind, we were ushered into the smaller audience chamber that we normally used for Amutech's business reports.

I glanced over at Hikaru-san, in the corner of the room. He seemed totally calm, as if the incident yesterday hadn't happened. But I didn't think for a second that he was intimidated by me.

"We will dispense with the pleasantries," Petralka said as she arrived in the audience chamber. Counselor Garius and Prime Minister Zahar stood to either side of her, both looking pretty grim. A portentousness, or at least a tension, filled the room. I had known from the moment we came in that Petralka hadn't called us here for anything fun.

But what *did* she want?

"Garius," she said shortly. "Explain."

"Majesty," Garius said. He bowed, then took a step forward. He looked first at Hikaru-san, then at me, and then he declared: "Yesterday, the daughter of a noble family was, it seems, kidnapped."

"Kidnapped?" Minori-san and I looked at each other. It was all too easy to connect that word with memories of our Bahairam adventure.

Before we could get too far down memory lane, however, Garius said, "She isn't a student at your school, so you may not know her."

I definitely wasn't familiar with all the sons and daughters of the nobility, just the ones who attended our school. In fact, as the trouble with Shade demonstrated, periodic absences were so common among the students that the kidnappee could have been from my own classroom and I might not have noticed it.

But be that as it may—why call us here specifically to talk about this?

Maybe they just wanted to warn us because so many of the students at school were children of the nobility. After all, the school had once briefly been taken over by a terrorist group calling itself the Assembly of Patriots. Even Petralka herself had been held hostage at the time, so it was something the imperial government was likely to be especially sensitive

about.

“No demands have been issued as yet, so we can’t be certain this is a genuine kidnapping. However, an attendant of the girl in question reported having been struck in the back of the head and knocked unconscious. When they came to, the girl was gone. This item was found at what is believed to be the scene of the crime.”

Prime Minister Zahar approached us, holding something. He came to a halt, and we all looked closely.

“Are you gonna tell our futures?”

The impolitic mutter escaped me because there in Zahar’s hand was that classic fortune-teller’s tool, a crystal ball.

“He is not!” Petralka said sharply.

Sorry. The tension just got to me...

“It is a scrying orb,” Petralka said. “You’ve seen them before, Shinichi. They can reflect what appears in an Observer’s eye or any other crystal.”

“Oh... Sure.”

Now that she mentioned it, I vaguely remembered using some kind of crystal ball to keep an eye on the JSDF ambush at our mansion. It was almost like having security cameras around.

“Of late we have implemented some improvements,” Zahar said. “In order that we might see moo-vees without relying on the Jay-Ess-Dee-Eff’s gadgets, the crystals have been reworked so that they can replay what they have once shown. Granted, it still lags behind the technology of the Jay-Ess-Dee-Eff.”

“Er... So you’re saying...”

Apparently he meant that the crystals didn’t just show things in real time now, but could play recorded clips as well. Of course, the spherical shape of the device meant there would be inevitable distortions in the picture, and there was the issue of the small size of the crystal—in other words, I didn’t think it was going to replace video projectors or tape decks, but why worry about that?

“What about it, if I may ask?”

In response to my question, Prime Minister Zahar gave a brief nod of his head. The crystal ball began to glow.

For a second, I squinted against the light. But then the glow vanished, and I could see an image reflected in the crystal’s surface.

What it showed left me speechless—because I recognized what it was.

Or, more accurately, I knew what had to be. The crystal displayed a picture of a girl. She was drawn in a sort of "anime" style, but she was rendered in 3D. And she was half naked...

Without a word, I reflexively turned to Hikaru-san. Yes: this was a screen from the ero game he had imported. I had never seen the girl before, but the interface, the buttons and icons, were the same as the game Shade had been playing yesterday.

The reason I had never seen this particular girl was probably because players could customize the character to their liking. This one was almost symbolic: she had golden hair and green eyes; she was wearing a dress, and she even had a little jeweled crown on her head. Everything conspired to suggest she was a queen, or at least an important noblegirl.

A chain ran from a collar around the girl's neck; she lay on a stone bed in a thoroughly compromising position. Given that she was lying there with practically no clothes on and being forced to do sex stuff, it seemed kind of incongruous that her crown managed to stay on her head. But it all added up to one thing.

"Shinichi." Petralka's voice was cold.

You got it: the girl onscreen seemed to be a caricature of Petralka.

Then again, unlike Petralka, the screen girl was pretty well-endowed... er, I mean, forget about that. A quick glance at the screen was enough to make clear that it appeared as if some sheltered queen or noble had been taken hostage and was being forced to perform sex acts—sadism embodied.

Petralka found herself confronted with erotic art that seemed to be based on her. It would be no surprise if she found it humiliating. I didn't have it in me to argue that *no, no, ero games are an integral part of that fine thing called otaku culture!*

"What is this? What in the world is going on here?"

"No—um—this—"

"Su-Such things—" Petralka's voice shook and she started to flush red.

The otaku culture she had been exposed to so far had included the occasional bit of fan service, but never anything outright sexual—let alone this sort of S&M, subjugate-a-noblegirl thing. Even I could tell this was very bad.

I see now...

The ero game, the one with the infinite replayability. Games like that are usually less about the story and more about being able to freely create any character you like, and being able to enjoy yourself with them in a variety of different scenarios. There may be a few basic character templates available, but it's up to you where you go from there.

If the game included easy-to-grasp symbols like long silver hair, green eyes, and a crown, people would take a character with these characteristics to look like Petralka. Beauty is sometimes thought to be constructed statistically—for example, when the eyes aren't too close together or too far apart, but rest at a specific distance that's the average of a great many examples, it's considered to be the most beautiful. If the game were to include a character template that incorporated symbols like that, it would naturally look like Petralka.

And honestly, those details probably held for a lot of young noblewomen in Eldant.

"This is a girl of the nobility, isn't it?" Garius asked as if he wanted to be sure. "And this is clearly a product of Ja-pan, is it not?"

"Uh... Er, well, yes, technically..."

"And the one who brought it here—the owner—it is you, isn't it, Shinichi?" Garius fixed me with a sharp glare.

"Do you..." I could feel my knees starting to shake. "Are you saying you... doubt me...?"

Maybe their thought process was: this game was mine. Say the game stirred up my passions. And say that after doing a certain thing over and over in an ero game, I finally decided I wanted to try it with a real noblegirl, and, unable to control myself—

Garius didn't say anything, but just held me with that dangerous look. He didn't deny it. Was that the same as confirming it?

"B-But that's—"

"The fact remains that this was found at the scene of the crime."

They took the fact that a noble-subjugating game like this existed, added in the fact that an actual noblegirl had been kidnapped... and came to the understandable conclusion that the culprit had been playing this game.

"B-But—"

2D and 3D were different things! Er, but the game was in 3D... I mean, no!

There were a number of comebacks I could have made: why would anyone leave behind a crystal ball showing something like that? I didn't even know crystals like that were being made! But I suspected none of these arguments would have the persuasive power I needed. If anything, they might...

"Shinichi," Petralka said. "Even if this is not yours, it leaves us with the question of whose it is. There seems scant room for doubt that this is a product of Ja-pan. In other words, that an object you imported caused the kidnapping in question. Is this not a natural conclusion?"

"This image alone would substantiate a charge of lèse-majesté," Garius said with a discreet cough. "If something like this were to become popular, it could threaten the stability of our nation with its humiliating depiction of the nobility. For better and for worse, 'Made in Ja-pan' articles are gaining influence. If your otaku works depict the humiliation or subjugation of the nobility or the imperial family as correct and proper, there is every danger that such thinking will spread to the populace."

I stood open-mouthed. This was bad. This was really, truly bad.

I thought of various legal cases I knew about from Japan. Practically every time a girl was kidnapped, the mass media would parade images of ero games and otaku goods from the criminal's room as if to say, *See?!* It became a nice, easy scapegoat: a minority that could be oppressed with minimal inconvenience to society at large. It made people feel better if they could dismiss such criminals as mere otaku.

They're all perverts. A brigade of criminals waiting to be unleashed.

That's why they can, and should, be oppressed. It's what's right! And we're right to do it! ...Ring a bell?

"And now..." The way things were going, the same thing could easily happen here in the Holy Eldant Empire.

I stood silent for a moment. Unsure what to say, I looked to Minori-san for help. But she was quiet, too, her lips drawn into a thin line. Maybe she was trying to figure out how to get through this situation.

It was then that I remembered something Minori-san had said: that it was dangerous just to bring the idea of equality into the Eldant Empire. The whole notion that everyone is equal was like another way of saying that you didn't have to respect the nobility—and if you went far enough down that path, it might start to seem obvious that you would deliberately try to

embarrass nobles or even the ruling family.

Of course, in our own history there are plenty of examples of illustrations and songs and such that mock those in power, and I assumed things were similar here in Eldant. I didn't have to import the idea of equality for rebellious impulses like that to arise.

Now, though, I turned toward Hikaru-san.

He was the one who had actually brought that ero game here.

Surely he was the one who should address the situation we were in now.

I looked his way in hopes of encouraging him to do just that—but when our eyes met, he turned away from me with a cool expression as if to say none of this meant anything to him.

Crap. He was going to foist this off on me.

And after all, my proverbial business card still said "General Manager of Amutech." Details aside, final responsibility rested with me.

"Shinichi." Petralka said my name quietly, and I straightened up with a touch of panic. The empress glared down at me from her throne. "We want you to explain this."

"Er... I..."

I searched for a response. I looked at Hikaru-san again—but the importer of the naughty game in question looked completely unconcerned, as if this had nothing to do with him. Out of the corner of his eye he looked back at me evenly, his face beautiful in profile.

As I've already said, at that moment in time, the general manager of Amutech was, in fact, me. That little title meant that the indiscretions of my subordinate, Hikaru-san, became mine as well. I might claim that everything he had done had been on his own initiative, but that would leave me open to charges of negligent management.

In the end, I admitted that the ero game in question was certainly from Japan, but swore I hadn't imported it; I said I would conduct a thorough investigation and report back. Then I left the castle. Of course, I had no choice but to suspend school for the day. Given that I was currently a suspect in the disappearance of a noblegirl, it might cause some untoward

misunderstandings if I were to be teaching classes at a school packed with other young nobles.

At least Petralka and the others had let me explain myself. But all I had done was buy some time. The fundamental problem still needed solving.

"Something's fishy here!" I said to Hikaru-san the moment we got into the foyer of the mansion.

"How do you mean?" Hikaru-san asked, looking cool. I had no idea if he was just very good at concealing his emotions, or if the discussion at the castle had really meant nothing to him.

"How could we possibly take responsibility if something like that happened because of that ero game!"

"Ayasaki-kun," Minori-san said, her expression stern. "Were you the one who brought that thing here?"

"Are you so quick to doubt me?" Hikaru-san asked. He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, continuing, "On the basis of our *interests*, I would say he's the more suspicious character, hmm?"

"Yes, Shinichi-kun has imported ero games," Minori-san said. "But he knows all too well what can happen if you carelessly introduce new culture. He knows firsthand, you hear me? He might bring something like that over for his personal use—but to just spread it around without so much as consulting with us or even mentioning it? He wouldn't."

"Minori-san..."

It looked like, for the moment, I had someone's trust. Much like with Myusel, I thought I might cry from sheer happiness—but now wasn't the time for an embarrassing display like that.

"Looks like you got me," Hikaru-san said with another glance at me and a shrug of his shoulders. "Yes, I'm the one who imported that game. But all of this is entirely *within* expectations, don't you think?"

"Wha...?"

Minori-san and I both looked puzzled, but Hikaru-san explained with a smile, "I mean, I assumed something like this would happen eventually. Sick, disgusting otaku commit sick, disgusting crimes. It's happened in Japan, hasn't it?"

"Wha—?!"

Minori-san and I were both lost for words.

I'd had a sense that this was how Hikaru-san thought, but to hear him

denigrate otaku so openly was still startling. These weren't the words of someone who really thought of himself as an otaku. He sounded a lot more like the politicians who had sent a JSDF special forces unit to eliminate me.

At long last, I connected the dots.

It wasn't that Hikaru-san had a mercantilist streak. He was *only* interested in numbers and whatever was presented to the public. There was a chance he had never even seen *Dark Knights* or *Rose Princess*, or that he didn't actually like them very much. When I thought about it, I realized his remarks about both series had been either things that were objectively obvious, or that you could learn with just a little bit of digging. I didn't remember ever hearing him talk about what he found interesting in a given show or how it had made him feel.

All of his arguments about these works had been quotations—secondhand knowledge. Something he had acquired. So it wasn't surprising that he should have been sold the idea that "what sells is what's right." He had no personal basis on which to judge whether a work was interesting or boring or whatever.

A doll, huh?

I thought back on what Myusel had told me. Hikaru-san had described himself as a doll. Someone who had no aspirations of his own, but could only fulfill the role expected of him by those around him. In order to think of something as interesting or uninteresting, you have to have a basic set of likes and dislikes—Hikaru-san, who had never had preferences of his own, but had always relied on the reactions of others, probably just couldn't say what he liked or not.

That was why he disliked things that were ambiguous, that relied on feelings. Because he couldn't understand them himself.

That was why he liked things that could be measured and quantified with nice, simple numbers. Because those made sense to him.

In fact, he seemed to truly hate otaku works and those who cherished them.

"Otaku are all just a bunch of criminals waiting to happen—"

"We aren't all that way!"

"But isn't it a fact that such crimes *have* happened? Isn't it?" He looked at me through lidded eyes. "All that criticism—doesn't it proves that otaku are more prone to kidnap girls, or be gropers, or perpetrate brutal murders

than people who aren't otaku?"

"That's a manufactured impression!"

"And what proof do you have of that?" Now Hikaru-san was calm again. "Show me the data that demonstrates that otaku *aren't* more likely to commit crimes than anyone else."

"I—"

"*Probatio diabolica*. The devil's proof. That's not a fair question," Minori-san said, rescuing me as I stood there grasping for words. "I think the burden's on you to provide data to back up what you're saying."

"Proof is hardly necessary. It's just common sense. Everyone knows it." Hikaru-san laughed contemptuously. Then he turned to me, his smile becoming triumphant. "More to the point, though, you keep saying *ero game* this and *ero game* that, as if you think that game is the cause of this incident."

"Isn't it?"

"If you think so, then haven't you effectively accepted my thinking? Give an otaku an ero game, and he'll turn into a criminal. That's how otaku work."

"Th-That's not what I meant—"

"Then what did you mean? Isn't your argument that we shouldn't import ero games because they're dangerous? You sound just like a politician. Trying to curtail freedom of speech—is that something an otaku would do?"

"Y-You've got it all wrong..."

Of course, that wasn't really the point. But I felt my thoughts churning as I grew less and less able to follow Hikaru-san's argument.

This was no good. Hikaru-san had known all along that he would be called out for this and had come armed with arguments. Right here, right now, with no preparation whatsoever, I was utterly unable to engage with him. He already knew what his conclusion was, and he had no intention of an honest exchange of views here.

"Look at Japan. Everyone loves to bash otaku, but the entertainment industry has hardly disappeared. This isn't a serious problem we're dealing with. 'Once on the shore, we pray no more.' Understand?"

With that, Hikaru-san turned on his heel and began walking briskly toward his own room.

Minori-san and I stood in the foyer for a moment.

“Shinichi-kun... What are you going to do?” Minori-san asked, not looking away from the retreating figure of Hikaru-san. “For better and for worse, this is Eldant we’re in.”

“Believe me, I know...”

In other words, this wasn’t Japan.

This wasn’t Japan, so we would see people like Shade, people who had become obsessed as a result of an overstrong stimulus. It might be just one bit of culture, but this wasn’t a world where resistance to such a thing had been built up by small exposures over time. The way I chose to handle this could cause a dramatic reaction—but if I did the wrong thing, we could find ourselves faced with a stunning backlash.

This had grown beyond a problem of what to do about Hikaru-san.

“Let me think for a bit.”

“Hm...” Minori-san responded with a small smile. “Give it your best shot. I’m expecting a lot of you.”

“Sure.”

I nodded. But really... What *was* I supposed to do? I chewed my lip, feeling as if I couldn’t see my proverbial hand in front of my face.

Chapter Four: Only One Smart Move?

And so the next day came.

I made an appearance at Eldant Castle with Minori-san and Hikaru-san. Just like the day before, Petralka, Garius, and Prime Minister Zahar were present in the audience chamber. The previous night, I had alerted them that I wanted to present a fresh explanation.

“Well, Shinichi,” Petralka said, opening discussions for the Eldant side. “You asked us to grant you some time, and so we have. How is it that you intend to explain yesterday’s incident?”

“It’s true that the game in question made its way into Eldant with Amutech’s help. But because it was an experimental item, almost a personal effect, oversight of it wasn’t strict enough. I take responsibility for that.” I bowed my head as I spoke. No matter what else I might say, this was one fact I couldn’t avoid.

Then I went on. “Now, in regards to the game in question. It isn’t specifically a game about putting nobles or royals in terrible positions. There’s a great deal of freedom in how you design the character in that game, so it is possible to create a girl who looks like nobility. Whether or not to do so is up to the owner of the game.”

“And what is your point?” Petralka asked, her eyes narrowing. “Are you claiming that the humiliation of the nobility and the royal family were not your intention with this ‘ero game’ or whatever you call it?”

“What I’m going to say next relies somewhat on speculation,” I said. “The question is whether the person who obtained and played that game had a specific intent to mock the nobility or the imperial family. Most of the people who currently possess 3TS and PLP systems are members of the nobility. The consoles originated as prizes in our soccer tournament, and were given to the lizardman team.”

Of course, from there, most of them had been sold to rich merchants or noble families.

“And what kind of character designs would they readily understand?

Members of the opposite sex whom they're already familiar with."

A large degree of freedom can be a blessing when designing a character, but if you're not used to that much freedom of choice, you can just end up lost instead, not knowing where to even start. So it's not that surprising if someone, creating a character in 3D, were to model it on someone they knew.

"I want to repeat, the game itself was never conceived with the intention of humiliating anyone in the Eldant Empire."

I had realized something the night before. Thinking about all this in the context of a game made in Japan had left me blind to it at first, but the Eldant Empire was part of another world, a place whose values and morals were closer to Middle Ages Europe than contemporary Japan.

In a word, this was a place where it wasn't uncommon for the children of nobles to get married in their early teens, where demi-human kids trained so that they could enter the military in order to gain citizenship, and all of this was considered perfectly normal. The social mores that caused Japan to view violence and sex as "harmful" just... didn't exist.

What did the Eldant Empire think was a problem? A game that involved humiliating someone who appeared to be a noblegirl—in other words, one that might encourage the mockery of the nobility. And then the fact that, at the same time they were worrying about this game, a young noblewoman had actually been kidnapped.

"Having said that, at the moment, we don't know the perpetrator's identity, nor do we know whose game system the game in question was played on. Until we have the facts, I recommend confiscating all games and game systems from the students."

"Hold on just a moment." The objection came from Hikaru-san. "Whatever happened to freedom of speech? You don't get to make the laws around here."

"This is Eldant. Not Japan," I replied with a shake of my head. "That's why you won't be punished for giving an X-rated game to kids under eighteen."

Hikaru-san caught his breath.

"However, the Eldant Empire needs an appropriate response to this situation. Freedom of expression isn't an excuse to do anything you want, anytime you want, anywhere you want. Again: this is the Holy Eldant

Empire. Things aren't the same here as they are where we came from."

Hikaru-san stood silent, biting his lip. I had spent all night thinking of this argument; it was no surprise if he didn't immediately have a comeback.

"What do you think of confiscation, Your Majesty?" I asked.

"Hmm." Petralka tapped her chin. "A good question. We agree with your suggestion that it might remove the cause of the kidnapping. Of course, we don't wish this to be taken as an absolute declaration that such things *are* the cause..."

Petralka trailed off. I understood: Petralka was the one who had approved of otaku culture and encouraged it to spread. She didn't want to think that her beloved import might be implicated in a crime.

But even so, it was still a fact that a crystal ball with an image from an ero game on it had been discovered at the scene of the crime. And we certainly didn't have the evidence to declare that simple coincidence.

"Shinichi," she said. "If you take away these 'gayme sys-tems,' it will be equivalent to admitting that the 'sys-tems' were at the root of this incident. Can you live with that? Depending how things go, it could even lead to restrictions on Amutech's activities."

You didn't have to look as far as the Assembly of Patriots to find people who didn't look kindly on what me and my friends were doing here. Some of our opponents were probably right here, in this castle. They would surely see this as a prime opportunity to attack me, to press Petralka to strip away some of the diplomatic privileges Amutech had enjoyed. And even the empress herself couldn't ignore her advisors forever.

I understood her thinking, and her concerns. And it made me happy to know she was worried about us. But still...

"One of the students is in a grave condition," I said. "He's addicted in the worst possible way. I'm given to understand that there are others in a similar state as well. I assume you have people who drown themselves in alcohol here in Eldant. Well, drowning yourself in an ero game is no more healthy. I know I'm really only in a position to make suggestions, not to force anything. But I don't want to sell things here that are obviously detrimental to our customers' health, on the logic that they chose it, so it's their fault."

"Shinichi..."

"Your Majesty. I think Shinichi-dono may have the right of this," Prime

Minister Zahar said to Petralka. “Be it alcohol or medicine, there is a proper way to imbibe all things. Those who don’t know it, but only use it at will for their own pleasure, invite destruction.”

Petralka was silent for a long moment, then heaved a sigh. As far as it went, though, it looked like she had come around.

“We’re going to go from house to house and confiscate any students’ game systems we find,” I said, and looked at Minori-san. I had explained my plan to her ahead of time. Having seen what happened to Shade, I worried that trying to take away the systems might result in an argument, or even violence. This was part of why I needed Petralka’s approval.

Minori-san didn’t say anything, but she nodded: *Leave it to me.*

“Very well,” Petralka said finally. “We will trust you to dispose of the games properly.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. With your permission...”

Our report was over. I prepared to leave with Minori-san to repossess the games. Hikaru-san got ready to go, too, looking none too happy about it.

But just as we were about to leave, I heard a voice behind me.

“Wait, Shinichi.” It was Garius.

I looked back and saw someone who looked like a knight whispering in his ear. When had that guy gotten there? Garius nodded several times, then turned back to me.

“It seems a communication has reached the home of the kidnapped girl. Along with ransom money, their demands include the dissolution of Amutech, the execution of Kanou Shinichi, and the release of certain imprisoned criminals.”

“Uh... What?”

“For what it’s worth, Shinichi, this clears up any suspicion against you,” Garius said, but he was frowning. “However... The criminals this kidnapper wants freed are the Assembly of Patriots.”

I gasped. Minori-san and I looked at each other, shocked.

The Assembly of Patriots, a.k.a. “Bedouna.”

They were what you might call a terrorist group. They were not fans of the otaku culture being imported from Japan, regarding it as cultural invasion, and they weren’t afraid to use violent means to oppose it. When they attacked our school, they had taken hostages, including me, Myusel, Minori-san, a number of students—and Petralka, who had happened to be

present at the time. As I was the representative of Amutech, they had even tried to kill me.

I won't bore you with the details of our miraculous escape, but in short, the terrorists had been captured, and I hadn't given the Assembly of Patriots any more thought.

On reflection, though, there were no guarantees that the leader of the terrorist organization had been present that day. Why should I be surprised if the group had officials and foot soldiers who were still running free?

"Minori," Garius said. "You had best take caution. There is reason to fear that Shinichi and Matoba, as well as you and your Jay-Ess-Dee-Eff, may be targeted. That rabble is still hiding among the citizenry."

"Yes, sir," Minori-san said, nodding to Garius, a severe expression on her face. "Thank you very much for telling us."

"Yes... Be careful indeed," Petralka said, looking at me. With the suspicions against me cleared, it seemed her trust had returned. But as happy as that made me...

"The Assembly of Patriots..."

What a time for such a dangerous group of people to resurface. The three of us left the audience chamber, all with a sense of foreboding.

After we left the castle, we found Matoba-san, who had been waiting for us. Just back from Japan again, it seemed. His trips had certainly been frequent recently.

"I gather there's been some kind of trouble," Matoba-san said, pointedly taking off his magic ring. This was a clear indicator that he was about to say something he didn't want the Eldant people to hear. We each followed his example, taking off our rings as well.

"Hikaru-kun," Matoba-san began, looking at the newcomer before he even turned to me. "I've read Koganuma-kun's reports."

Incidentally, the Holy Eldant Empire didn't yet have an internet connection to Japan, but there were local area networks established at several locations nearby—specifically, our mansion, the JSDF garrison, and the school. Minori-san submitted daily reports to the garrison server, and Matoba-san must have looked at them first thing on getting back here.

"Don't you think perhaps you've overreached yourself?"

His tone wasn't harsh, but his words were clearly critical.

"I—"

Hikaru-san seemed about to say something, but then stopped unhappily.

“The thing we must fear most in our work is losing the trust of the Eldant Empire. Your failure threatens to undo everything Shinichi-kun has built. You were supposed to be his assistant—but instead you’ve undermined him.”

Hikaru-san listened in absolute silence.

“I had high hopes for you, but...” Matoba-san let out a very long, very pointed sigh.

Wow, that’s rough.

I couldn’t help sympathizing, even though I wasn’t the one being criticized, and maybe I should even have felt a bit of schadenfreude.

“Shinichi-kun,” Matoba-san said, finally turning to me. “What was the outcome in there?”

“Well, I’ve been cleared of suspicion for the kidnapping as such, but...” I gave him the gist of our talk in the audience chamber.

“Mm. So you’ve been put in charge of the confiscations, eh?”

“You’re making it sound like a bigger operation than it is. It’s just me, Minori-san, and Hikaru-san for now.”

“Hmmm...” Matoba-san held his chin thoughtfully. “All right. Kindly take care of things,” he said, and nodded.

The Eldant capital of Marinos is built with the imperial castle at its center. The castle itself is made from a hollowed-out mountain, and countless buildings spread out from there along a gently sloping field.

You can probably guess that the closer you get to the castle, the more important the residents.

Actually, that made Amutech’s mansion—done in the style of the Eldant nobility, but located on the outskirts of town, far away from the most prestigious districts—something of an oddity. But that’s neither here nor there.

We left the castle and made right for where all the nobles lived. Hikaru-san was with us, not least in the interest of his own safety. He’d been looking pretty put out and hadn’t said a word since we left the audience.

There were some things I would have to talk with him about, and more than a few things I wanted to ask him, but they could wait until we had cleaned up this mess.

And that was what found us at one noble's house...

"We need to take back your game system and check the contents—"

"Nooooo! That's miiiiine!" the boy wailed, totally ignoring our explanation. He was one of our students. He flailed his arms and kicked his legs until the maids and butlers managed to get a hold of him and drag him off into the house. On the orders of their masters—the boy's parents—I assumed. I heard the heavy interior front door shut, muting the boy's shouts.

"Thank you for your cooperation," Minori-san said with a bow, putting the game system into a suitcase.

I knew appearances were important when doing something like this, so I mostly left the legwork to Minori-san, who looked soft and gentle. I bowed too, of course—only Hikaru-san stood over by the bird-drawn carriage, his back turned to all of us.

"I sincerely apologize for having to cause such a commotion..."

"Not at all. If anything, it's a relief," said the student's mother, who had come out to the foyer. "He's just been shut up in his room all the time, fiddling with that... gayme sys-tem, did you call it? And every time he opens his mouth, the most incomprehensible things come out..."

"I'm... I'm very sorry about that..." I offered, shrinking into myself.

The student may or may not have been playing Hikaru-san's ero game, but it was perfectly possible to get addicted to non-X-rated titles, too. I really should have been alert to the possibility that this would happen.

I really should have known.

The people of Eldant didn't have any "immunity" to these sorts of things. Even in Japan, there were kids who played games 24/7, and parents who worried about them. In a land with so few entertainments, bringing the most cutting-edge technology in was a recipe for addiction.

"Once we've inspected the system's contents, the system itself will be returned to you," Minori-san said. "After that, we leave it up to your discretion whether to give it back to him or not."

I don't know... Somehow, it was like we were doing a recall of a bad product.

"We'll be moving along, then," I said. Bowing repeatedly to the

student's mother, we returned to the carriage and headed for the next house.

Of course, that makes it sound farther away than it was. The houses we wanted were all packed in here, so we could have walked from place to place without losing much time.

"Next is... here."

A moment later, as I double-checked the map and the register of student names, we arrived at our sixth house.

There was a guard in a small guardhouse by the gate. We gave him our names and reason for visiting, and then he opened the big iron gate. As we got out of the carriage and went up the path to the front door, I gave Minori-san a weary look.

"How many more of these?"

"You ought to know. Four to go."

"Right..."

We went from house to house, talking to the students, collecting game systems.

Some of the pupils sulked, but nonetheless handed over their games—maybe they felt guilty, or really were playing ero games and didn't want to be found out. But frankly, the ones who got angry and fought us about it to the bitter end were more common. *Confiscation* is such a simple word, but having to actually do it is amazingly exhausting. You would think we were devils who had come to take away these kids' most precious treasures.

The door of the latest house opened, and a middle-aged woman appeared from inside. "Yes, hello?" She blinked in surprise and looked at each of us in turn, then said, "You're... the teachers from my son's school, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Minori-san said with a nod. "I'm Koganuma Minori, and this is Kanou Shinichi and Ayasaki Hikaru."

"And what brings you here today?"

"I apologize for the suddenness, but we'd like to speak to Claus-san. Is he here? It happens that a small problem has been found with the game systems that were given out as prizes after the soccer tournament some time ago. We're visiting all the families who bought systems from the lizardmen, and collecting the systems in order to investigate the problem."

"Gayme sys-tem? Ah... yes," the woman said, overcoming a moment's incomprehension to nod at us. "I'm very sorry, but Claus isn't at home right

now.”

“All right. We’ll come back again later, then. Do you know when he might be back?”

“Perhaps around evening... Ahem, more to the point, my son no longer has your gayme sys-tem.”

“Huh?” I asked blankly.

He didn’t have it? Meaning...?

“I must tell you, he sold it.”

“He sold the game system?”

“Indeed,” his mother said with a sigh. “After my husband went to such trouble to buy it from the lizardmen, he went and... Well, he wanted to buy something or other that’s apparently very popular at school right now. Picture-cards or some such?”

Minori-san and I looked at each other, our eyes wide.

She meant the trading cards. Probably rare ones, at that.

Wow... Who knew that would come up here and now?!

“Even after he comes home, he just spends all his time playing with those cards. He keeps talking about how he has to get stronger and stronger ones... It’s gotten a little frightening recently.”

Obviously, I knew that some of the trading cards had become quite valuable in the classroom. But I never dreamed that someone would sell a game system just to get them. Granted this was a pilot program created with an eye toward full-scale sales in the Eldant Empire, we had introduced the trading cards specifically as low-price items. They just weren’t worth that much. I’d wanted them to be at a price common people could afford.

In contrast, the game systems were prizes for the soccer tournament, which we had never intended to sell. In other words, there were currently no plans to bring any more of them over here, and everyone knew it—hence why they commanded such a high price. The main reason the lizardmen had sold them off was because they didn’t really understand video games, while they had a certain currency among students who had been introduced to games by the home consoles we had set up at the school.

Put it this way: the students were well aware just how rare these things were. If one of them had sold his game system, it meant he wanted rare cards even more than that game.

So this wasn’t just about ero games. The trading cards fed into some

serious addiction, too.

"I'll speak with him too," Minori-san said with a deep bow, "when the school is back in session." Then we thanked the woman and went back to where our carriage waited at the gate.

"Looks like it's worse than we thought," I said.

"Yeah," Minori-san said, sighing.

The ero-game thing happened entirely without my knowledge, but the game systems were originally my idea, notwithstanding that the students had asked for them. And I had known that the trading cards would be imported, of course. I had agreed to it without reservation, in fact. I bore some of the responsibility for not predicting this outcome.

It was a failure of experience.

Amutech's work had been going so swimmingly that maybe I had acted a little naïve. It was easy to criticize Hikaru-san, but I don't think he was the only problem here.

Speaking of Hikaru-san, he continued to look upset and not say a word. He just followed around behind us silently.

He seemed to be ridiculing otaku, but it was probably...

Didn't he say something about his parents wanting a little girl?

If you want to have fun dressing someone up, a girl is best. So his parents had been disappointed to get a son.

I paused thoughtfully. How would it feel to have your parents tell you they wanted a girl instead of a boy?

Hikaru-san had said to Myusel that he felt empty. He had behaved like a little girl so as not to make his parents any more unhappy. Loath to disappoint anyone, he became exceptionally sensitive to the feelings of those around him and tried to make their wishes come true before they had even articulated them. Whatever he wanted went on the back burner; he focused entirely on meeting others' expectations, until suddenly he realized he didn't even know what he wanted anymore...

Maybe the emptiness he described was the result of living that life. And that made me sad.

"Okay. Better get to the next house."

"Sure thing."

Minori-san and I nodded at each other, and I pulled out the map to check our destination.

All of a sudden, I heard a noise I couldn't quite make out.

I thought it was a woman's scream. I stopped and blinked.

"Was that—"

My imagination?

For a moment, I thought so, but when I looked up at Minori-san, it seemed like she had heard it, too; she had her suitcase in her hand. Ever since our hostage crisis with the Assembly of Patriots, she had kept a 9mm handgun in that case to give us the upper hand even if we were attacked by multiple enemies.

"What's going on?" Hikaru-san stopped, looking around doubtfully.

Minori-san was vigilant and ready to fight. "Shinichi-kun, Hikaru-kun," she said. "Get back to the carriage, it's—"

—*dangerous*, is where I suppose she was going with that, but I was already running in the direction of the scream.

"Hey! Don't! Hold on!" Minori-san tried to stop me, but I ignored her and kept running.

All I could think about was the kidnapped noblegirl. I didn't know her name or what she looked like, but if she really had been kidnapped because of our work—Amutech's work—then we had to do something. We had to do something about the next kidnapping that might occur.

I rounded a corner onto another street. There, to my shock, I saw several men trying to drag a girl into a bird-drawn carriage. She was probably the daughter of one of the families that lived around here. Two women who looked like her attendants were collapsed on the ground.

I instinctively hid myself in the shadows.

Apparently I had found myself smack in the middle of an actual kidnapping. So were these guys part of the Assembly of Patriots?

"No way..." Hikaru-san whispered. He had followed me and now joined me in my inconspicuous location. Minori-san did the same, even as she pulled the 9mm out of the suitcase and prepared to use it. It didn't look like the men had noticed us. I guess Minori-san figured there was no reason to waste a perfectly good opportunity for a surprise attack.

There was a total of five men forcing the girl into the carriage. It was a big one, pulled by no less than four head of birds. (Wait, is that how you

count birds pulling a carriage?) The men climbed aboard themselves and got ready to leave. This was the noble quarter, and with houses so big, there was a good chance no one would hear the girl screaming. Even if they did, it would take time for people to reach the area.

"Let's follow them."

"Right," Minori-san said, and clicked the sliding switch on her gun's safety device—marked S, 1, M—from S (for "Safe") to 1 (for "Single Round"). Machine pistols can spray bullets in a way that's useful for suppressing multiple enemies, but worthless for pinpoint sharpshooting. From a distance, it would be impossible to get the men but not the girl. We'd be more likely to kill the hostage than rescue her.

We would be better off breaking into the enemy base. If it worked, we might even be able to save the other kidnapping victim.

"I'll go get our carriage," I said, jumping up and running for our ride.

Bad luck: I was making a break for it just as one of the men looked my way.

It probably really was just coincidence, but it was also the worst possible timing.

Our eyes met.

"Oh, crap," I muttered, but it was already too late.

The man shouted something to his companions, and the ones in the carriage all turned to look at me. I didn't understand what the man was saying, which suggested he wasn't wearing a magic ring. Those only functioned if both parties to a conversation were wearing one. And although I had learned to speak a bit of the local language, if someone was talking fast or had a heavy accent, my chances of understanding them were pretty well nil.

The men had a short, brusque conversation that went over my head.

"Shinichi-kun, get back!"

No point in hiding anymore: Minori-san came out with her gun in her hand.

At the same moment, the men shouted something. And a second later, *BAM!* The whole carriage shook.

"Huh?!" From my spot, I couldn't see what exactly had happened, but the yoke holding the Cho**bos—er, I mean, the large birds—had come flying loose.

I wondered what they thought they were doing—but it became clear a second later.

One of the oversized birds came charging straight at us.

"Uh..."

Why was this happening?!

All the birds pulling all the carriages I had ever ridden in had been docile and polite. They were the size of cows or horses, but when you spent enough time around them, they became pretty endearing—maybe it was the plump, round bodies.

The one making for us now, though, was definitely not endearing. Sure, it looked like any other such animal, but it was foaming at the beak and making a sound that might best be described as: "GYOOOO!!" Being a bird, the whites of its eyes weren't really visible, but I assumed they were bloodshot.

On top of that, I could see now that it wasn't just their size that was threatening: this bird's beak was fear itself. It was as thick around as my wrist, and as sharp as a pickax. If that thing ran you through, you would be lucky to survive the experience. These were birds with the strength to pull a carriage; they were certainly capable of delivering a lethal blow to a human being.

The thing that startled me most, though, was the animal's face.

Specifically, a place just between its eyes and up a little.

It almost looked like it was growing a horn.

No. That wasn't a horn...

"Puppet...!"

It was one of the spikes Bahairam had developed to control living things. The last time I'd seen one it had been pounded into a dragon, and this one was much smaller—but the shape, and the effect, were the same.

The bird was being controlled with puppet magic. But why was Bahairamanian magic being used here?

BLAM.

A gunshot rang out. It came from Minori-san's machine pistol.

The huge bird slowed and pitched forward.

"You hit it?!"

That was Minori-san for you. She could land her shot even with the relatively low-accuracy machine pistol. Granted, it was a large target charging straight toward us, which made the shot comparatively easy, but still.

“Minori-san—”

But Minori-san just waved her hand in my direction, as if to say, *Go!* She kept her eyes on the bird.

With a jolt, I saw why. Yes, the bullet had hit the bird. You could actually see blood dripping from its lower leg. But it showed no sign of pain or fear. In fact, it was frothing and screeching even more, as if to say that *now* it was angry...

Then it charged at Minori-san.

She fired again, and this time the bird didn’t even stop.

You really can't underestimate an animal's ability to survive. I didn't know the biological specifics of this bird, but I did know that if you were hunting big game like deer or bear, you would want a large-gauge magnum rifle. A 9mm handgun just didn't have the stopping power.

For that matter, there was the possibility that creatures being controlled with a puppet spike didn't feel pain. The spikes themselves seemed to be a sort of weak point, but between the low accuracy of the machine pistol and the violent thrashing of the target's head, it would be difficult to hit it squarely.

With a sharp exhalation, Minori-san dove to the side, out of the way of the bird's mad charge. She rolled along the ground, firing her gun again—in automatic mode, this time.

Brrapapapapapap!

A continuous roar, like a machine hard at work, echoed around. She must have fired at least a dozen rounds, and although some of them missed, several lodged themselves in the big bird, sending feathers flying. And *still* the animal didn't flinch. In fact—

"Minori-san, look out!"

Minori-san immediately rolled out of the way. A second huge bird smashed into the spot where she had been just a second ago.

Now it was two on one, against a pair of raging opponents who didn't appear to feel pain. Opponents who could put a human out of a fight with one good blow.

Maybe even Minori-san couldn't get out of this one. But just as I was starting to really worry...

"Hey...!"

I heard Hikaru-san make a sound. I looked in his direction, to see the bird-drawn carriage rumbling off. When combined with the power of puppet magic, apparently it only took two birds to pull the carriage. Or maybe the two birds that had been set on Minori-san had always been intended for just this sort of situation.

Hikaru-san gave a cluck of his tongue and set off running.

"Whoa—hang on!" It almost looked like he intended to catch the carriage on foot. True, with just two birds, their speed would be somewhat reduced. Hikaru-san left the scene of the crime at a pace that suggested he was darn well going to catch them.

This was bad. It would be bad to lose track of those guys, but it would be bad too if Hikaru-san got too caught up in chasing them and they captured him.

“Shinichi-kun?!” Minori-san shouted, eyeing the two massive birds.

“I’m going to go get Hikaru-san back!” I shouted back.

I didn’t think there was anything he could do by himself. Minori-san, meanwhile, was trapped by her avian antagonists. Whether I stopped Hikaru-san or helped Minori-san, I was the only one currently capable of doing anything.

“Hey...!” Minori-san called, paling—but I had no time to wait. I hated to leave her, but I went dashing off after Hikaru-san.

I’ve got to admit, I definitely didn’t expect Hikaru-san to go dashing off after that carriage.

Why not? I just figured he wouldn’t care if a stranger got kidnapped. He had told us in so many words that it was perfectly natural for otaku to commit crimes, and he had expected them to do so—so I took him for someone cold and unfeeling.

But apparently he was not going to stand by and watch this girl get dragged off.

His pursuit didn’t strike me as a calculated move.

“But... even... so...” I muttered, my breath coming in ragged gasps. “How far... are they... gonna go...?!”

The carriage had already led us to the edge of town—to the very entrance to the forest. Maybe the Patriots meant to lose us in the woods. It was true that wherever they went in the city, there were likely to be witnesses, just like we had stumbled upon them committing their crime. There was hardly anyone to see them in the forest, and the trees would block the view of anyone looking in...

“Huff... puff...”

At last I lost sight of the carriage, and came to a standstill on the outer edges of the wood.

Pathetic. And also, extremely uncool. I made a nice, dramatic, *I’ve-*

gotta-do-something! exit, and then I run out of breath and lose track of them.

I leaned against the trunk of a nearby tree and tried to catch my breath.

"What... are you... doing here?"

Several steps ahead of me, there was Hikaru-san, also breathing hard, but not looking any worse than I was. His face was sweaty and he looked thoroughly annoyed.

"Well, you... just went running... off. And you were... in danger... by yourself."

Hikaru-san's brow creased as he looked at me. Finally, he gave a short sigh and started walking into the forest. I followed after him, saying, "Shouldn't we... go back to Minori-san... and call for help...?"

"And what if they get away while we're doing that?" Hikaru-san practically spat.

"It can't be easy... to drive a carriage through a forest... Whether they ditch it... or just hide it... it would have to be close to their base..."

Say the two of us managed to track the Patriots to their base. What were we going to do then? Neither of us had a weapon. I knew simple offensive magic, but nothing that was likely to help me against multiple opponents, especially when they had a hostage.

"You can go back if you want. I'm going on." Hikaru-san's walk turned into a march.

Now that we couldn't see them, we had no idea where in this forest the Assembly of Patriots might be. Which meant we didn't know when we might suddenly be attacked...

"Hikaru-san," I said. He was catching his skirt on the foliage and just generally having a hard time walking.

"Yes, what?"

"Why'd you go after them like that?"

For a guy who was always calculating risk, it seemed like pretty long odds.

Hikaru-san stopped walking. The expression on his face, which I could see in profile, suggested I had asked a question he didn't want to answer.

"I'm sorry. Since we don't know what's going to happen next... I'll apologize now."

"Huh...?" That was definitely not what I had been expecting him to say.

“Until I saw that kidnapping with my own eyes... I was taking it all too lightly.”

“Taking what too lightly?”

“The effects my actions would have on the real world.”

I didn’t say anything right away, but at that moment, it made sense to me.

Pretty much everyone has a different impression of things they know intellectually versus things they’ve experienced for themselves. For example, we have a fundamental fear of the fact that people die, yet when we see wars or murders on television or in the newspaper, they honestly don’t feel that real to us. They might involve dead people, but to the extent we don’t perceive those deaths with our own senses, the impression we get is similar to when a character dies in fiction.

Maybe we hear about someone we don’t know dying in a far-off country. We may sympathize, but we aren’t tormented by feelings of guilt or powerlessness. We understand that it doesn’t really have anything to do with us—that in a way, we’re totally separate from it.

Sometimes, online or on TV, I had seen video footage of wars, but even when I knew that they showed something currently happening somewhere in the world, that real people were really dying—that intellectual understanding never made me want to drop everything, run off to a war zone, and try to help. Maybe donate to charities for the less fortunate, but that’s about it.

But what if someone you know is in a situation like that? Or what if it appears someone might be killed before your eyes?

Suddenly, you can’t look away; grim reality bears down upon you. You can’t pretend it doesn’t affect you. You don’t have to be the one being kidnapped to know that you’re involved.

Someone is being kidnapped. Depending how things turn out, she might even be killed.

The thought had left Hikaru-san unable to just stand there. It wasn’t a matter of numbers or buy-in. It was simply emotion, and it was the truth. Which meant...

“What’s with the smile?” Hikaru-san asked, looking at me in puzzlement.

“Nothing,” I said ambiguously, shaking my head.

He had no weapon.

It was entirely possible he was putting himself in danger.

And yet even so, he hadn't been able to look the other way.

Maybe this person, Hikaru-san, wasn't really rotten to the core. In fact, I felt a twinge of affection for him, because I had run into lots of people like him online. He was a total chuunibyou—saw the world on a slant, pretty cynical, yet still, somewhere in his heart, there was real goodness, a real belief in what was right. The kind of person who could easily tell those he didn't get along with to "Just die," but who also could never ignore people who came to him for help.

Maybe, after all this, it turned out he really was an otaku. The kind only a peace-addled country like Japan could have produced: someone equally susceptible to both the brutal nature of reality and the kind of impossibly beautiful ideals you can only find in fiction.

Hikaru-san turned away from me irritably. And then, without a word, we started forward again.

The thing was, I didn't know if we were actually going in the right direction, and I suspected Hikaru-san didn't, either. We either followed what appeared to be wheel tracks from a carriage, or went wherever there seemed to be enough space for a carriage to fit through.

"Where *are* they?" I muttered in an effort to hide my unease.

This kidnapping wasn't likely to be an impulsive act. The kidnappers probably had their escape route worked out ahead of time. They would know the geography of the forest. Which meant they could almost certainly get through the woods and out again much faster than a couple of kids bumbling aimlessly among the trees. Depending how far in advance they had planned this, they could even have cut some trees down to make a path their carriage could use.

We had to find them, and soon.

Wait... Was I sure it wouldn't be better to join up with Minori-san again first?

Hikaru-san didn't say anything, but it looked like he was starting to sweat having lost the trail of the Assembly of Patriots guys. Still, he walked pretty authoritatively. Feeling not at all comfortable, I followed him.

"Wait, isn't this—"

Then he stopped.

“Huh?”

My foot came down... but didn’t find the ground.

No ground?

.....Cliff?!

“No way!” I drew back as quickly as I could, but Hikaru-san, who had been half a step ahead of me, grabbed my hand. Just as I was leaning over, hoping to grab his shoulder to stop him...

“Yikes!”

“Whoaaaa!”

There was no escaping gravity. Hikaru-san and I went tumbling down.

Ahh! Falling!

As I instinctively squeezed my eyes shut, a flurry of thoughts went racing through my mind. The girl we weren’t able to save. Minori-san, fighting with the huge bird. Myusel and the others, back at the mansion. That last anime episode. How my short life was coming to an end, and I’d never even gotten to ditch my virginity...!

Okay, so I’m not proud of all of those regrets. Hikaru-san and I kept falling.

Thud! The impact rattled me from my butt all the way up to my brain.

Apparently we hadn’t actually fallen that far. Luckily—I mean seriously, by sheer, dumb luck—I had fallen in a sitting position. I felt like I’d taken a hard kick in the behind, but if I had been leaning over any further when I fell, who knew what might’ve happened?

“Eeyow,” I moaned, rubbing my sore bottom. Then my eyes flew open. “Wait, what?!”

Hikaru-san was sitting beside me, looking equally shocked.

“Huh...?”

I looked down, and as I registered what I had landed on, my eyes got wider and wider.

Beneath me was something covered in feathers.

I could see a rope connected to a stout neck and a round head.

What’s more, there was something sticking out of its head...

Was I, by any chance, sitting on top of a giant bird? One with a spike pounded through its forehead, no less?

And wouldn’t that mean...?

Pressed by an uninvited feeling that things were going nowhere good, I

turned around.

"Hey..."

Behind me I saw several very surprised men and one kidnapped young woman looking at me from inside a carriage.

Well! It's a small world after all!

Apparently, when Hikaru-san and I tumbled over that cliff, we were lucky enough to fall smack on top of the guys from the Assembly of Patriots—or rather, on top of the birds pulling their carriage.

Wait... Lucky?

No contemporary manga artist would lower themselves to such base coincidence—yet there we all were, me and Hikaru-san and the Patriots, frozen and staring at each other. All of us were transfixed by what seemed to be the sick sense of humor of the man upstairs.

For a moment, the only sound was that of the carriage wheels crunching over fallen leaves.

Hikaru-san was the quickest to come back to his senses. He grabbed for the spike in the head of the bird he was sitting on. That was fair enough. Anyone could see those spikes practically screamed *weak point*. I wondered how the Bahairam mages felt about that.

In any event—

Caaaaaaaaawwwwww!

These were animals that didn't seem to mind being shot with a 9mm pistol, but pulling on that spike was evidently not pleasant. It let out a tremendous howl and stomped the ground like a fighting bull.

"Y-Yikes!" I exclaimed. The bird Hikaru-san was riding was connected to the one I was on!

Both of us ended up thrown to the ground. Thankfully, all the leaves and leaf mold made for a soft landing. Frankly, it was nicer than when we had landed on the birds.

"Are... Are you okay?" I asked, turning to Hikaru-san.

"That's weird," he said ruefully as he sat up. "That spike is practically begging to be pulled out... But I couldn't get it."

"I'm not that surprised," I said tiredly. If it were that easy to get the spike out, these things wouldn't do well as weapons. Granted, the spikes

really didn’t look very solid. But still—use your head, guy!

Okay. Forget about that for now.

The carriage rumbled past us—then stopped a few meters farther on. It looked like both of the birds wanted to go in different directions, halting forward progress. At least Hikaru-san had managed to stop the kidnappers.

There was a shout that I couldn’t understand. The door flew open, and the men jumped out, carrying the girl with them. As they dragged her out of the carriage, they held a knife at her throat, making sure we could see it.

One of the men spat something that sounded unpleasant, but I didn’t know what he was saying.

Five men emerged from the carriage. Four of them carried swords at their hips and glared at us with undisguised contempt. The last one had the girl and the dagger. And...

A crystal ball?

The man dragging the woman along had a crystal ball dangling from his belt. Why would he have one of those? Was it similar to the one on which we had been shown the game screen the day before? The ball was glowing faintly, but I didn’t see any image in it...

“Hey...”

Then I remembered. Could it be one of those crystal balls that detects magic by reacting to the presence of magical power? The Assembly of Patriots had used one the first time I had encountered them. But that glow meant there was some kind of magic going on right now...

Huh. It must be reacting to the puppet magic.

I couldn’t be sure which of them was the magic user, but somebody in that group of men had to be controlling the birds using puppet magic.

Grumbling and growling, the four men with swords drew them all at once.

“Whoa... Hang on...!”

This situation had just gone from bad to deadly.

Hikaru-san and I scrambled to our feet, facing the men across a gap of several meters. Not counting the guy with the hostage, it was four vs. two, and we didn’t have any weapons. Plus, at least one of them was a magic user.

It didn’t look like much of a fight.

Of course, I could draw on Tifu Murottsu, which Myusel had taught me,

but as offensive magic goes, it was the simplest of the simple. An amateur like me could hardly expect to be very accurate with it anyway, and I couldn't use it repeatedly. So even if I managed to get the spell off, I would only be able to do so once, and could only hope to produce a basic attack in their general direction. But that crystal ball would probably warn them before I did.

I took a trembling step back.

I'm pathetic. I'm embarrassed by myself.

We'd chased them all this way, but so far from rescuing the girl, we had to run away with our tails between our legs in the face of their superior fighting strength.

Hikaru-san stared at the men for a long moment. Then finally he said, "I guess I have no choice. This was the one thing I wanted to avoid... but I guess it's time to reveal my true power."

"Huh?"

His true what*?!*

Don't tell me we were in for some convenient plot twist like that Hikaru-san secretly had incredible psychic powers or something?! I mean, not that this was a plot per se, but seriously, what the heck?!

As I stared at Hikaru-san in disbelief, he intoned: "Darkness! O power of the dark tribe that has lain in the eternal purgatory! Gather here now and become my sword! Be thou my wrath upon my enemies!"

Note: The light is in Hikaru's imagination. Some of our dear readers may be unable to see it.

Was that a... a spell, or something?

"Appear now! O Great Flare!"

The rest of us drew in a collective breath. I threw myself to the ground. Hikaru-san definitely sounded like he meant business.

And then...

Silence.

More silence.

Ten seconds passed, and nothing happened.

Still more silence.

Hikaru-san stood there looking as if he expected to fire a laser beam out of his palm or something. I spotted a single bead of sweat running down his forehead.

"Wait, were you just trying to scare them?!" I cried, jumping to my feet. "What was the point?!"

"I thought if I distracted them, you would take the opening to attack them or something!"

"What are you, crazy?!"

"I thought you'd be able to think on your feet!"

"I told you, the problem is, that's completely crazy!"

We were at it like some kind of twisted comedy duo, but the Assembly of Patriots wasn't going to stand there and watch us forever. In fact, seeing Hikaru-san's "attack" fizzle out seemed to convince the men that we didn't have any power to speak of. Mocking grins came over their faces and they approached us with swords in hand.

This was not good. We were about to be chopped into little, tiny pieces.

Trying to blow them away with magic really might be my only hope... But if I wasn't careful, they would notice the moment I started chanting and just cut me straight down. They had that crystal to let them know when—

Wait... Huh?

Something occurred to me.

When Hikaru-san had been making his big show of having a magic spell up his sleeve, the guy with the magic detector hadn't even glanced at it. You'd think that would be the first place you'd look if your opponent seemed like he was going to use magic.

Hold on...

That was it! There was no point in looking at the crystal ball!

The puppet magic controlling the big birds was constantly active. The animals, who had been ready to rampage moments before, were already calmed down and standing sedately.

All of which meant...

“Okay,” I said, holding up both hands. Even the Patriots should have understood that it was a gesture of surrender; I was obviously showing that I didn’t have any weapons. It was a bit of body language that could be understood no matter which dimension you were from.

“We have no hope of beating you. But I’m the empress’s favorite. I think I’d make a valuable hostage, so please, don’t kill me yet.” I tried to make myself look and sound as servile as possible.

“Sh-Shinichi-san?!” Hikaru-san’s eyes were practically popping out of his head. “How can you be so—wait! They can’t even understand you, how are you going to negotiate?”

I kept talking as I got closer to the men. “Oh, don’t listen to him. Please, at least save me. I don’t want to die yet. Living is all that matters to me.”

Our opponents watched me suspiciously. I kept taking one step closer, then another, as slowly as possible, so as not to antagonize them. And then...

“Whoops.”

The men grabbed me.

“What are you doing?! Have you gone stupid?!” Hikaru-san shouted, clearly freaking out.

The men were all grinning cruelly, ridicule plain on their faces. I’m sure they thought I was foolish and self-serving. They didn’t have to understand what I was saying to catch my facial expression and tone of voice. Plus, Hikaru-san’s reaction probably helped them comprehend what I was getting at.

“Ahh—!”

Beside me, the girl with the knife at her neck froze. The fact that I could understand what she said showed that, as a member of the nobility, she was wearing a magic ring. Meaning...

The girl wore an expression of despair. When she first saw us, she must have been overjoyed to think help had come, and now she was doubly despondent. I sighed and said to her, “Sorry. Looks like we weren’t up to it.”

She didn’t say anything.

“These men are probably going to XX and □□ you before they finally △△, I’m sure of it. You might not like it, but they’ll probably force a □□ ☆☆ into your—”

She still didn’t say anything, but she gave a sharp intake of breath and the blood drained from her face.

I’m sure she was picturing the sort of depraved stuff that would have violated the Under-18 law in Japan. The girl started to weep.

“What are you saying?!” Hikaru-san demanded. “Have you gone completely insane?!”

“Oh... no...” the girl moaned.

“Oh, you poor, unfortunate soul!” I cried.

“Will you shut up already?!” Hikaru-san shouted.

I, however, went on tossing out one idea after another, listing off things that would give an ero game writer pause. Honestly, I was a little bit frightened by how readily I could reel off a whole slew of words you definitely could *not* say on television. But, uh, let’s not worry about that for now.

“N... N... Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!”

The girl’s terror had finally reached a fever pitch. She trembled and wept as if she had completely forgotten she even had a knife at her neck.

“So on that note,” I said, “do you think you could crouch down for me? I’m going to fire off some magic.”

“Huh...?”

With all the strength I could muster, I swiped away the hand of the guy grasping my shoulder, raising my own right arm. It was my extreme good luck that the men, confident of their victory, hadn’t immediately stopped me from talking to the young woman.

For a second, the girl was as surprised as they were, but as I swept the man’s arm aside, she closed her eyes and ducked down. And then—

“*Tifu Murottsu*!”

A gust of wind slammed into the men. With a collection of short cries, they were blown away... along with the girl.

I thought I had aimed the spell high enough that it would just catch the men’s heads, but apparently the girl had gotten tangled up with the kidnappers as they all went tumbling and had been pulled along.

Geez. I am really, really sorry about this.

As I mentally apologized, I rushed over to the groaning men. I thought there was a chance I would have to hit them with another burst of magic. But maybe I really nailed them, because they all just lay there moaning, not showing any sign of getting up.

"Gosh..."

For better or for worse, it looked like my magic had come out considerably stronger than I'd expected. Okay, so it wasn't great that I had caught the girl in the blast, but she looked uninjured, and she was still breathing.

All's well that ends well, right?

.....No?

As I was nervously hauling the girl up, I heard Hikaru-san whisper, "Don't tell me... Did you deliberately get yourself captured?"

"I was afraid it wouldn't be strong enough if I didn't get close," I said. "I'm just a beginner, so my magic isn't very accurate, either. Then again, that helped me hit all of them, I guess."

"And all those terrible things you were saying...?"

"To cover up my chanting," I said with a rueful smile.

Their crystal wouldn't let them know I was using magic, so the only real problem was actually intoning the spell. I needed the girl to scream in order to cover the sound of my muttering an incantation.

Trust me, making girls cry by describing horrific carnal acts to them is not how I get my kicks.

.....Seriously, trust me. Please?

The girl's eyes drifted open.

"Oh, you've come to."

"Ahhhhh!" she screamed.

H-Hey, no, I swear I wasn't—

I was just about to try to explain myself when I felt something cold against my neck. I didn't have to turn around to know what it was. I could see the tip of a sword out of the corner of my eye. Someone was holding a blade to my neck from behind me. Whoever it was, if they wanted to, they could slit my throat with the slightest motion.

The man exclaimed angrily.

Now *that* was something I understood, ring or no ring. *Nice try*, or

something like that.

Crap. I dropped the ball here.

I knew that when it came to magical attacks, my amateur abilities couldn't stand up to those of a full-fledged mage; I wasn't as accurate and couldn't use a spell repeatedly. But it looked like there was a real difference in power, too. Given that the girl had regained consciousness, I shouldn't have been surprised that her more physically fit captors had one or two members who would recover quickly. Maybe this guy had just pretended to be knocked out like the rest of his friends and waited for a moment when my guard was down.

This was very bad. I was going to die.

Panic caused my mind to go blank. Here I thought we had cleverly escaped the Assembly of Patriots, but I had badly underestimated them. What to do? What to do? Was there any possible way I could escape this situation?

I tried to think over the fear inspired by the cold steel, when—

Shunk.

There was a dull noise. Just for a second, I thought maybe it was the sound of my throat being slit, but I felt no pain, and there was no blood.

At length, there came a heavy thump, like something hitting the ground. That was when I noticed: I no longer felt the blade at my neck.

Ever so slowly, I turned around.

And there was Hikaru-san with a sword in his hand.

He must have snuck up behind the guy and attacked him. I assumed he had gotten the weapon from one of the Patriots who was still on the ground. From the fact that my own antagonist wasn't spurting blood, I guessed Hikaru-san had hit him with the flat of the blade rather than stabbing him.

"Yikes..."

The man's eyes had rolled up into his head. That must have been a pretty powerful blow.

"What?" Hikaru-san asked almost sulkily as I looked at him.

"Nothing, that's just... really something. Swords are heavier than they look. I'm impressed you were able to swing that thing around."

I had once gotten an opportunity to hold the weapon of one of the royal

guards at Eldant Castle, and I had felt like it weighed a ton. Apparently these wide, double-edged longswords were created less to cut than to smash through armor, and as such were naturally heavy.

"I like to keep in shape," Hikaru-san said, putting his hands on his hips. "You think it's easy to wear girls' clothes? You put on one ounce of excess weight, and suddenly you don't fit anymore." He sounded like he was in his element.

"Heh, right," I said drily.

Then we both gave very, very long sighs, relaxing at last.

First things first: we tied the Assembly of Patriots guys to a nearby tree with some rope. Conveniently for us, it was in the carriage along with several pairs of handcuffs and manacles; presumably, they had been planning to kidnap more than one person. The birds had become docile—in fact, they hardly moved at all, so we just tied them to the tree. I guessed this effect was deliberate so that if whoever was controlling them with magic lost consciousness, they wouldn't just wander off somewhere.

I wondered if that meant the birds who had attacked Minori-san had calmed down, too.

Then Hikaru-san and I, along with the kidnapped girl, got some distance from the men and waited for Minori-san.

After what had happened with Bahairam, Minori-san had given me a super small broadcasting device to carry. The battery was only good for about twelve hours, so she had warned me only to turn it on in the event something happened to me. She would come running.

"Um..."

Suddenly Hikaru-san was looking at me uncomfortably. He held up his hand so I could see him removing his ring. He must have wanted to talk about something that he didn't want the girl to overhear. Since both parties to a conversation had to be wearing rings for them to work, we could prevent her from understanding our words by taking ours off. Well, technically, she wouldn't be understanding our words regardless, but anyway...

I took off my magic ring.

Only then did Hikaru-san begin to speak, his eyes on the ground. “About that ero game...”

His eyebrows furrowed. Maybe it was the way his shoulders were slumped, but he looked oddly small. It was especially weird to me because it made him seem—well, kind of sweet, almost endearing; even though I knew he was a guy. The way he was usually so brazen—almost sadistic—gave this vulnerable side of him a “moe of the gaps” quality.

No! I wasn’t moe for him. I was *not* moe for him. I wasn’t.

Or so I insisted to myself like a mantra.

“And the trading cards, too... I didn’t... I guess I didn’t quite think them through. I admit there was... a failure of imagination on my part. And I’m sorry for that.”

I looked at him with my mouth hanging open. I had never expected him to admit his mistakes so candidly. The game and the cards might *not* actually have anything to do with the kidnapping by the Assembly of Patriots—but seeing real addicts appear among the student population, and finally being present at a real kidnapping, had apparently shocked him into reconsidering his perspective. Had made him realize that things don’t always go the way you expect.

“But what are we going to do? Even if we confiscate them all—”

His point seemed to be that you can’t put the genie back in the bottle.

Then there was the issue of that crystal ball with that image recorded on it. We could confiscate all the game systems and all the ero games around, but the content would continue to circulate in the form of those crystal balls. It made me think of all the gameplay videos on all the video sites on the web and all the views they got.

It was testimony to how hard it was to stop people from seeking out what they wanted. Regardless of what the original creator might have intended...

“Oh, that.” I, however, gave a confident nod. “I have... well, let’s call it a special plan.”

Hikaru-san looked at me, puzzled. Maybe it seemed strange that I should be so confident at this point. But I could at least say this: Hikaru-san might have been smarter than me, and a better businessman, but there was just one way in which I overwhelmingly outclassed him.

Experience.

I had been in the Eldant Empire for close to a year and had a sense of things that he couldn't possibly have after just a month. I knew who the people of this country really *were*, much better than he did.

For better and for worse, the people of the Eldant Empire had a pure approach to culture. They had accepted trading cards and ero games, which we had simply floated as ideas, eagerly. It's just like how, if you're not used to drugs or alcohol, even the weakest stuff can have a profound effect on you. I had learned that firsthand long ago.

"Anyway... Just leave it to me."

I clenched my fist and then gave him a big thumbs-up.

Three days later.

I was at Eldant Castle.

"Shinichi. This way," Petralka said, beckoning to me.

Specifically, I was on a balcony overlooking the central courtyard, along with Petralka, Minori-san, Garius, and Prime Minister Zahar. Down in the courtyard was a huge crowd including knights, nobles, the nobles' kids, and on and on. There probably hadn't been a gathering this big since our infamous movie showing.

"Ahem. I believe all is ready," the prime minister said.

"That's a big help," I replied. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Garius said. "It was you who caught the gang we were all after, Shinichi. This hardly amounts to a reward, but the least we can do is accommodate your request."

The people from the Assembly of Patriots had been arrested, thanks to which the other kidnapped girl had also been safely recovered. In general, things were looking up.

Incidentally, Eldant also captured and was investigating the big birds with the spikes through their heads—there seemed to be every indication that Bahairam had been pulling the strings here. More to the point, that made it appear that Bahairam was supporting anti-government factions in Eldant behind the scenes. The Patriots' profound class prejudice seemed

antithetical to the all-are-equal ideals of Bahairam, but apparently they figured that the enemy of their enemy was their friend. Garius, as head of military matters in the nation, evaluated the situation like so: “There is danger in having such an unprincipled and undiscriminating group for enemies, but the silver lining is that we’ve obtained a perfect example of the Bahairamanian secret weapon about which we wondered so much.” Then again, given that it *was* a secret weapon and they knew they were giving it to a group with opposite ideas to theirs from whence it might fall into the hands of the enemy, I thought it would have been logical to attach a self-destruct device or something. But whatever.

I stepped forward, holding in my hand a megaphone I’d borrowed from the JSDF. Petralka stood beside me, to lend me authority. I took a deep breath to relieve my nervousness, then looked out once more over the courtyard.

The gathered crowd looked back at me, quiet, waiting for me to speak. They didn’t know yet what I was going to say. I had simply asked that the nobles and other people who lived around here—specifically, anyone who had been involved with the ero game in this instance or who seemed like they might encounter such a game in the future—be brought here to hear something important that Kanou Shinichi, the evangelist of otaku culture, had to say.

That meant everyone here was of a certain social station—and they all possessed magic rings.

I swallowed audibly. This had been my idea, but faced with so many people, I couldn’t help being a little nervous. Ugh—hang on. Were my *knees* trembling?

“Shinichi...” From beside me, Petralka discreetly took my hand.

“Petralka...” I looked at her, and she nodded to me with a small smile.

Ahhhh! You’re so cute, Your Majesty! You’re adorable!

Even as the moe excitement welled up in my heart, outwardly, I became more calm.

All right. I can do this.

I took a deep breath.

“My friends, it has often been said that I like pretty girls.”

I didn’t have to talk very loud for the megaphone to pick up my voice and carry it to the entire courtyard.

“My friends, I like pretty girls. No, friends, I *love* pretty girls!”

A mutter ran through the crowd at this startling pronouncement.

“I love maids. I love loli girls. I love big-sister types. I love *kouhai* characters. I love sailor suits, blazers, and swimsuits. I love tsunderes and boyish girls. At school, in the classroom, in the hallway, in the schoolyard, at home, at the pool, at the beach, in town, in a big mansion, in the woods—I adore every type of girl that exists in two dimensions!”

I could hear my own voice getting louder and louder as I spoke.

Yes! I can speak! Mein Führer, I can speak!

“I love when a powerful tsundere character thunders something and sends the protagonist flying with a kick. My heart leaps with joy when, later, she shows her softer side. I love yanderes who do the most outrageous things because they love the protagonist so much. And the feeling when she chopped off that disgusting MC’s head and put an ax in her rival’s belly was so exquisite. I love kuuderes, with their expressionless faces and sharp gazes. It moves me deep within my heart when an otherwise impassive heroine blushes just for a second.”

The murmuring among the nobles became louder. I ignored them, clenching my fist emphatically.

Yeah. Now would be the perfect time to have some glasses, or at least a Charlie Chaplin moustache.

“Gentlemen, all I ask for is beautiful girls—for two heavenly dimensions! Gentlemen, I ask you, as fellow brothers-in-arms, what is it that you really want? Three dimensions? Merciless, stinking reality? No! Yearn for 2D!”

As my shout trailed off, I heard someone in the crowd shout back: “Two-dee!”

Uh, actually, I have to admit... I had engineered that one.

I’d heard how important timing was in getting a spark to catch when it came to things like this, so I had planted Myusel and Elvia in the crowd, dressed in Hikaru-san’s clothes so they looked like nobles. And then...

“2D!” someone else shouted.

Perfect! The spark is burning!

“2D! 2D! 2D!”

The shouts began to overlap, filling the air with a rumbling echo. It was mostly students who were shouting—them, and their brothers and sisters. In

other words, the people who had already been “infected” by otaku culture. Their parents seemed, for the most part, just surprised. But that wasn’t a problem.

2D!
2D!

“2D! 2D! 2D! 2D! 2D! 2D!”

To any outside observer, I’m sure it would have been a truly bizarre sight. But as far as I was concerned, it was exactly what I had been waiting for.

“Very well. Then 2D is what you shall have.” Unconsciously, the corners of my mouth turned up. The point here was to make sure it was the nastiest, cruelest smile I could muster. “We are a clenched fist, about to come crashing down with all the strength we can muster. For we who have wallowed in the darkness of reality for so long, simple ‘ordinary’ 2D will no longer suffice! 2D! *Exceptionally beautiful* girls!”

Mmm. That felt good.

I went on in high spirits.

“We are just one part of one country, numbering less than a thousand strong. But I believe that each of you is a tried and true warrior, every single one of you worth a thousand troops. So between us, we represent a Comiket with the power of a million and one men!”

Caught up in the excitement, I raised both hands. I didn’t even know if the megaphone was still projecting my voice, but by this point everyone was hanging on my every word, and frankly, it didn’t much matter what I said.

“Let us bring low those who will not turn their eye toward 2D! Let us show them the joy of beautiful two-dimensional girls! They shall know how wonderful the second dimension is! They shall know that there is more moe in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in their philosophy! Our kampfgruppe of one thousand otaku is going to burn this world down to moe ash! Stand with me, friends!”

A cheer went up.

Excellent! My audience was good and warm now.

Mentally, I switched to my next subject.

When it came to giving speeches, I was right up there with a certain Lieutenant Commander.

“Let me be clear—I mean loli!”

To be fair, I was moe about a lot more things than just loli, but for my purposes here we would let it slide. Why? Stay tuned.

“I declare that we good-hearted lolicons cannot turn to crime. It is in feeling moe for that most hallowed of types of 2D girl that lolicons first

taste the life eternal. To progress from that to laying hands on a 3D loli would be a danger to loliconism itself! We must give notice to those fools who would discriminate against us. This is the time when we must stand up for the future of lolicon!"

I shouted as lustily as I could.

"We must not confuse 2D with 3D! Because we are gentlemen! It is precisely our love for the 2D that prevents us from laying hands on the 3D! The moment you touch such a person, you cease to love the two-dimensional! How boorish! How crude and tactless! May any otaku so blind as to forget the precepts of the venerable second dimension be cursed!"

It would have been easy enough to tell them, "Don't do this."

But this was just the opposite. It would be more effective, more memorable, to tell them, "Doing this instead is cooler," or "If you do that, it'll be shameful."

"Yes! Now give voice!" I said, shaking my fist at the sky. "Yes lolita! Nooooo touch!"

I raised my right hand. There was a moment of shocked silence... and then the courtyard audience, very much on my side by now, responded:

"Yes lolita! No touch!"

"Yes lolita! No touch!"

"Yes lolita! No touch!"

Every fist punched the sky in rhythm with the chanting.

"Yes lolita! No touch!"

Ahh! Every heart in the courtyard was beating as one!

"Yes lolita! No touch!"

"Yes lolita! No touch!"

"Yes lolita! No touch!"

And on and on. The cries of "Yes lolita! No touch!" continued until the very walls of Holy Eldant Castle shook.

And they all lived happily ever after.

.....Probably.

I turned my back on the still-enthusiastic crowd and withdrew—and was soon met by Myusel, Elvia, and Hikaru-san, who all came running up to me.

"Great work," Myusel and Elvia both said. They were each in dresses that really did make them look like nobility. They also looked difficult to walk in, and for a moment I wondered who these girls were—but they were also extremely cute, so much so that I thought I could fall in love at first sight.

"Thanks," I said, and I meant it for all three of them, including Hikaru-san.

I'd been fairly confident I could pull this off, but without people to light the spark right when I needed them to, I might have been considerably less likely to succeed.

"Thanks to all your help, this was a big success—I think."

"Was this your big, secret plan?" Hikaru-san asked, seeming half annoyed and half shocked.

For what it's worth, Hikaru-san wasn't directly involved in getting the crowd going, but he had been standing with Myusel in the courtyard, and so had seen my little performance.

"One wrong move, and you would have been just another dictator at the rostrum," he said.

"Ah ha ha ha, ha ha... Well, yeah." I scratched my cheek.

"Anyway, it turned out the kidnapping didn't really have anything to do with the ero game, right?"

"That's what it looks like," I nodded.

It seemed like the remaining members of the Assembly of Patriots had been hoping to both secure money for their activities and commit a little terrorism simultaneously by kidnapping nobles; there was no fundamental connection to the game. The scrying orb that had been dropped at the scene of that first crime turned out to be pure coincidence. One of the students who had gotten sucked into the ero game had apparently created the orb so that he could "see" his virtual girlfriend even when the batteries in his game system died—and then he had dropped it as he was walking around.

Obviously, the student couldn't tell anyone about this, much less let it slip that he had designed his character to look like Petralka. So instead he resolved to play dumb if the issue came up. Prime Minister Zahar

investigated which orbs had been made recently and who they belonged to. Since scrying orbs weren't printed with serial numbers or anything, it was apparently a tricky process, but eventually we were able to uncover the story.

In short, there had never been a criminal committing a kidnapping because of his ero game.

In many cases, that might have meant Amutech could simply say, "Welp, nothing to do with us," and everything could go back to normal. And by our good fortune, that was how things had turned out this time... but that wasn't really the end of it.

For better or for worse, the people of Eldant had come to be thoroughly influenced by otaku culture. And so I decided to take the initiative, in hopes of preventing any highly-improbable-but-still-possible problems.

"Don't you think it's ultimately just a problem of feelings, though?" I said.

"Feelings?" Hikaru-san asked.

"Or, you know, etiquette or something. You were right, Hikaru-san, that there have been crimes committed by otaku, and I assume there'll be otaku who commit crimes in the future. But I don't think the percentages will be any higher than in the general population."

There are plenty of criminals who aren't otaku. And plenty of otaku who aren't criminals. Most of them, in fact. So it was mostly a problem of feelings—of the impression people had. To put it a bit more bluntly, it was nothing more than an emotional reaction backed up by no real proof. At least, I thought so.

It was just a hazy image people had.

In that case, why not change the image?

This is the kind of people otaku are.

These are the kinds of things otaku won't tolerate.

These are the things otaku will deride as uncool.

If you could get out ahead of it, create that sort of atmosphere around otakuism, that would do the trick. It would help inoculate people against the notion that otaku were more likely to commit crimes, and serve as a sort of self-policing mechanism among otaku themselves. Happily, most people in this world didn't yet have a negative bias against otaku. So what better time than now to secure a positive image for them?

That was my thinking, and so I decided to create an understanding that crime was not cool.

You know: *Whoa, man, wait, what? You're doin' crimes? Ugh! Pass!*

"It's possible you're right," Hikaru-san said, glancing back at the courtyard, from which frenzied chanting could still be heard. "But I don't think a normal person would come up with this particular method. I'm pretty sure only villains do this sort of thing."

"Maybe you're right. But one thing otaku never accept is goody-two-shoes orders from above." I shrugged.

"And another thing. Wasn't that entire speech basically just a rip-off of the Major and Gi***n?"

"I prefer to think of it as an homage. Or parody." I puffed out my chest. "And anyway, I've always wanted to try doing something like that once."

It's every guy's dream. Notwithstanding the actual content I ended up with.

"Uh...huh." Hikaru-san gave a wry smile. "I admit, you've got me completely beat—this time."

"Shinichi."

I heard my name just as we got back to the bird-drawn carriage parked by the inner gate of Eldant Castle, all of us ready to go home.

I looked back and saw Petralka standing at the castle entrance. She seemed gloomy; she was looking at me with her arms crossed as if she wanted to say something.

Huh? I wondered what was going on. My visit was already technically over.

"Hang on," I said to the others, then went over to Petralka, feeling puzzled. This was Her Majesty the Empress I was dealing with. Normally you would kneel before her and say something like, "How can I serve you?"

Instead I said: "...Yeah?"

As I approached, Petralka backed into the entranceway, beckoning for me to follow. What in the world could she want? Maybe there was

something she wanted to say that she didn't want anyone to hear, because even the royal guard, although present, were keeping a noticeable distance.

Seriously, what gave?

"Shinichi," she said again, looking up at me. "This incident was a real brush with danger."

"Oh, yeah. I'm sorry about that." It seemed a little late now, after that speech I had made, but part of the problem this time around had been my failure to keep a close enough eye on Hikaru-san, and I wanted to apologize properly. "But I swear, I never meant to cause so much trouble for you and the others—"

"That's not what we meant, dunce." Petralka frowned.

"It's not...?"

"What we were most worried about..." She paused for an instant, as if hesitant. Was it just me, or did her cheeks flush ever so slightly? "...was that you... ahem..."

"Something about me?"

"...that you might leave us..."

"Ah," I said after a moment.

Even if she didn't know exactly what the Japanese government had in mind by sending Hikaru-san over here, Petralka would certainly understand that something like what we had just dealt with could have threatened Amutech's position in the Eldant Empire—and by extension, mine too.

In fact, given that she was well aware of Japan's attempt on my life, she probably knew perfectly well that my status as Amutech's general manager was precarious at best, resting as it did on a delicate balance. Not that we ever really talked about it as such.

The point is, I could vanish from this world at any time. There were people, in both Japan and Eldant, who hoped I would. And so...

"Shinichi." Petralka stretched up to take hold of the collar of my shirt. "For you to simply... go away, after all the important-sounding things you've said... We won't permit it, you understand?"

"I—"

"We granted our royal permission for you to spread otaku culture in our Eldant Empire. You may not leave until your mission is completed. Do you understand?"

She seemed to grow embarrassed halfway through her little speech; still

holding my collar, she looked down, resting her adorable forehead against my chest, the last of her words coming in a whisper.

"Petralka..."

"Do you understand?!" She was red up to her ears.

Ahh! Be still, O my arms! I thought, fighting down the urge to embrace her small body—which I figured could well get me beheaded by the royal guards still keeping a watchful eye on us. Instead I said, "Yeah... I understand."

At one point, I had wondered whether, now that Hikaru-san was here, anyone would even notice if I disappeared. I would never think anything so foolish again. There were people who wanted me here. And I wanted to be here. So what did it matter who else was here too?

"I won't go anywhere until you say so, Petralka. I'll do what I can to make sure I don't have to go anywhere.

"...You won't," Petralka said, letting go of me. Then she fixed me with her pointer finger. "Kanou Shinichi!"

"Y-Yes?"

"We renew our command to you to spread otaku culture. We have chosen you. Therefore, answer our demand with all your strength and all your mind!"

Now, that was an imperial order. Even if she was blushing adorably while she gave it.

Ahh, Your Moe Majesty!

"As you wish," I said with a soft smile. I placed my right hand over my heart, like a butler responding to his master's command, and gave an ever so slightly pretentious bow.

And so, life in the Eldant Empire—or at least at General Entertainment Company Amutech—returned to normal.

We collected all the game systems and ero games, erased any potentially problematic data, and returned them. A few people who were already in the throes of addiction objected forcefully, but by way of apology Amutech provided specially made body pillows, and that seemed to mollify them. I supposed all the addicts were busy hugging their pillows and panting by now.

Somehow things didn't feel quite... resolved, but it was probably my imagination. Yeah, that had to be it.

As for the trading cards, we rebalanced the strength of the rarest cards as well as how frequently they appeared, making it so people wouldn't be paying illegal premiums for them. Anyway, the whole trading card thing had been a pilot program, and I expected to be able to sell a fair, balanced

product when we began offering the cards in earnest. Assuming nobody became hell-bent on using only the first run of cards, it would no longer be possible to use one or two overpowered cards to walk all over opponents.

The lesson, of which we were so vividly reminded, was that you had to think very hard before introducing new products.

And so...

"My feeling is we should be a little more thoughtful going forward," I said. I spoke to someone sitting on the couch opposite me—Matoba-san, who had dropped by to see how things were going.

"Yes, that might be a good idea," he said, as if it didn't really involve him. He still seemed like the quintessential bureaucrat. It was almost as if he were saying that all of this was outside his immediate jurisdiction, and so no responsibility of his—even though it had all started when he brought Hikaru-san here.

"Matoba-san," I said, a bit miffed at the way he was acting detached from all this. "Why do you think Hikaru-san was brought here from Japan at this particular time?"

Of course, I knew full well that Matoba-san knew what the Japanese government was thinking—if nothing else, Myusel had told me that she'd overheard Matoba-san and Minori-san having conversations about it. In my mind, the question was just to rankle him.

But he simply replied with a smile, "I'm sure I don't know. Perhaps it's coincidence."

"You think so, huh?"

Apparently he was going to stick to his story. On the other hand, if I was wrong about Hikaru-san having been sent here to replace me as General Manager of Amutech, then that meant they weren't going to drag Hikaru-san back to Japan to punish him or, in a worst-case scenario, kill him to keep his mouth shut.

For now, that was enough.

"Okay. Well, I guess that's about all I've got to report for now."

"I see," Matoba-san nodded, then looked at Hikaru-san, who was sitting beside me. "And what about you, Hikaru-kun? It sounds like you had a difficult introduction. Do you think you can continue here?"

"Absolutely," Hikaru-san said with a firm nod. He looked at the trading cards sitting on the table. "Despite how things turned out this time, they do

say failure is the mother of success. Whatever I do next, I'll make sure it succeeds without giving anyone reason to complain."

"How heartening," Matoba-san said easily. "Shinichi-kun, be careful he doesn't show you up, eh?"

"Yeah, I'll have to be on my guard," I said, and all I could do was smile tiredly at how Matoba-san pointedly put a bow on everything.

"Shinichi-san," Hikaru-san said, turning to me. "I acknowledge my failure this time, and I recognize my mistakes. But that doesn't mean I recognize you, okay? Just so you know—"

"What's with the tsundere tropes?!"

"Ts-Tsundere?! I am not!" For some reason, Hikaru-san had turned red. It only made him look even more tsundere-ish—like, if this were a game, it would be a clear sign of exactly how to deal with this character. A real-life tsundere? What the heck? I know what I said in my courtyard speech, but it was hard to just abandon three dimensions like— No, no, no, no, no, wait! I don't care how pretty he is, Hikaru-san's a man! He's got all the equipment!

Don't get moe for him, O my heart! Don't race for him, O pulse!

A new world doesn't have to begin here!

As I repeated these lines to myself like mantras, Hikaru-san said, "Someday I'll show you who's really fit to be general manager!" Which only compounded the sense of tsundere-ish-ness.

Aw, gimmie a break.

"I really doubt it," I said with a wry smile. "You and I just have different levels of experience."

I meant both as otaku, and as potential general managers of Amutech.

Of course, with time, Hikaru-san would gain experience too. But I wasn't going to make the hare's mistake and be overcome by this tortoise.

"Obviously, you get a handicap," Hikaru-san said, smirking. "It wouldn't be any fun to win too easily."

"If you're thinking of me as some kind of final boss, you're going to let your guard down and get clobbered."

"Who said anything about a final boss?" Hikaru-san said. Then he looked at me (he's so cute, I still can't believe he's not a girl!) and proclaimed, "I'm just saying it would be boring if you didn't put up a fight. I only play games on hard mode."

I was completely lost for words.

The response came instead from Matoba-san, who grinned to himself and said, “Now, where have I heard that before?”

□□□□□

To Be Cont’d...

Afterword

Hullo! Light novelist Sakaki here, presenting you with Volume 6 of *Outbreak Company: The Power of Moe*.

Most of you who have picked up this book will probably have noticed this from the "*obi*," but it's been announced (as of May 2013) that following the manga adaptation, there's going to be an *Outbreak Company* anime!

Myusel! Petralka! Minori! Elvia! And also, I guess (*What do you mean, you guess?!*) Shinichi, Brooke, Matoba, the LAV, and more will all move and talk for real! Well, the LAV won't talk.

Actually, this is the seventh anime I'm going to be involved in, and the fifth to be adapted from one of my works. Yet every time, I'm so deeply moved by it. This is the second time I was present at the announcement of one of these anime, and combined with the fact that this is going to be the first show based on something from the Kodansha Lanobe line, I admit to being a little anxious about how it's going to go.

On that note, I'm going to keep my hands off the scripting and such this time and just focus on writing the novels. I think they'll have my head if I don't. The schedule this year is really tight... (*What, just this year?*)

The upshot is, while I might get to watch the episodes a little earlier than my readers, I'll be just as excited as all of you to see the finished product.

Okay, but what about this book?

Just as I teased in the afterword to the last volume, I've introduced Hikaru as a sort of rival (?) for Shinichi.

At first there were a lot of things about him that I found somewhat difficult to write, but when I got to work with him a second time (I mean when I did the revisions), I found I had managed to connect with him. I'll leave it to you to read the book and see exactly what kind of character he is

—but from the perspective of the work, he's in something of a precarious position, so I'll be curious to see how readers respond to him.

In this volume, I did a somewhat extreme take on trading cards and ero games, but I promise there's no malice behind it. I think going overboard on anything, not just cards or X-rated games, can lead to arguments and problems; this book just happened to focus on those two things.

All right, then. If everything goes as planned, you should see the next volume in two or three months, where we'll be taking a brief break from the main story for a collection of vignettes. I think the cover will finally feature you-know-who. Maybe.

I'll see you next time!

Ichiro Sakaki
31 March 2013

Translator’s Notes

Illustrations

Figure

The brand name “Magma” on the box of the Petralka figure is a reference to the Figma brand. The multiple faces for the character, one of which is visible in the upper right of the box here, are a well-known feature of Figma products. The box whose spine is visible besides Petralka says “Myusel Fourant.”

Chapter One

Even the Grass and Trees

The proverb Shinichi is referring to is "*Kusaki mo nemuru ushi mitsu-doki*," literally, "The third part of the hour of the ox, when even the grass and trees sleep." In the past, timekeeping in Japan relied on a series of twelve "hours" (*koku*) based on the Chinese zodiac cycle, so that each of these divisions was equivalent to about two hours by Western timekeeping. In this system, the ox (*ushi*) represented the time before dawn, about 1 to 3 a.m. *Koku* could be further divided into four segments of about a half hour each, so the third segment (*mitsu-doki*) of the hour of the ox would be around 2:30 in the morning. Incidentally, this is also considered to be the "witching hour" in Japan, the time when one is most likely to encounter ghosts and spirits.

Clumsy Shrine Maiden Ghosts

Perhaps a reference to O-kinu, a ghost shrine maiden from the 1993 series *Ghost Sweeper Mikami*.

Otherworld Monster

In Japanese, *zense majin*. A reference to an early-70s drama called *Diamond Eye*, which features monsters who can change into human form. The allegedly famous words Shinichi never gets to say ("spirit wave of light that shines upon immoral beings" —in Japanese, *gedou shoushin reiha*) are used to force these monsters to reveal their true forms.

Rose Princess

The cleverly allusive Japanese is *Bara-hime*, which we've translated literally. The series is fictional, but is also a reference to *Rozen Maiden*, an early-2000s work about a group of porcelain dolls who are all named after different jewels. The character Suiren to whom Shinichi refers is probably a play on Suigintou, one of the characters in *Rozen Maiden*.

Turn into a Sword

Possibly a reference to *Tenka Hyakken*, a game in which some of the

swords can change form between a weapon and an adorable shrine maiden.

Stealing Holy Relics

Probably a reference to the *Fate* series.

Burning Prostrations

Yaki-dogeza; i.e., prostrating yourself on something very hot (in the original metaphor, a *teppan* grill). The expression first appeared in the 1996 manga *Tobaku Mokushiroku Kaiji* (Gambling Apocalypse Kaiji).

Destiny

In the original, Shinichi says, "Think of the heft the word □□ [destiny] has when you read it as *sadame*!" These two characters are usually read *unmei* (the standard word for "destiny"), whereas *sadame* typically means a law, a rule, or "what is appointed," and might best be translated as "fate." (Glossing a common word with a related word possessing a different nuance is fairly common in manga and light novels.) His point is that *sadame* sounds more portentous.

Señorita

The word *o-jou-san* (young lady) is glossed as *senyoriita*. Why? Not sure.

Itadakimasu

When Shinichi says he's a little embarrassed to be reciting "*itadakimasu*" in unison because it feels like being in grade school, he's thinking of how in schools in Japan, lunch is served in the classrooms, where the children all eat together. In fact, it's also served and cleaned up by the students; much like cleaning up the school after class, this is considered a vital part of their education. At lunch, no one starts eating until everyone is ready and the whole class says "*itadakimasu*" together.

There's an interesting secondary linguistic question about this line. In the original text, Shinichi and his housemates all simply say "*itadakimasu*." However, it's not entirely clear whether they're all reciting the phrase in Japanese, or if there is some Eldant equivalent that Shinichi's magic ring is "translating" as *itadakimasu*. We chose to include both a call-out to the

Japanese phrase and an English translation partly in deference to this quandary and partly for the benefit of readers who may not be familiar with Japanese table customs.

Ayasaki Hikaru

Here, the name Hikaru is written as □□ (light + flowing). In general, it's more typical to represent this name with just the kanji □. In addition, whenever the name is glossed in this book, the family name (Ayasaki) is written in hiragana, as is usual, while the given name is glossed with katakana. "Hikaru" is usually a masculine name in Japanese (the female equivalent would be Hikari), so maybe Shinichi should have suspected.

School Week

Shinichi says he was at school five and a half days a week. Saturday classes were standard in Japan until about 1992, after which they were phased out in principle; however, many schools continued to hold at least Saturday morning classes.

Order of the Dark Knights: Zero's Revenge

A *Code Geass* reference, previously mentioned in Volume 4.

Shin-ku and Konpekisei

These two character names continue the reference to *Rozen Maiden*, which has characters named Shinku (written with different kanji) and Suiseiseki.

Kuuki Yomenai

When Shinichi says that he, like many otaku, "can't tell what others are thinking," the Japanese expression is *kuuki yomenai*. Literally meaning "unable to read the air" and sometimes abbreviated to simply "KY," this expression describes someone who misses social cues and/or just generally doesn't "get" what's going on in the minds of people around them.

Layer

Short for "cosplayer." The word comes directly from the Japanese (*leiyaa*, from *kosupureiyaa*). We aren't aware of this expression having

currency among English-speaking cosplayers, but the meaning is clear enough that we let it stand.

The Gift of the Magi

This is a short story by O. Henry. In it, a woman sells her long hair in order to buy her husband a watch fob for Christmas. When he gets home that night, her husband reveals that he bought his wife a set of ornamental combs for Christmas—but he had to sell his precious watch to do it. The two of them realize how far they'll go for each other. The connection to what Shinichi says here seems to be strictly that the story invokes the selling of hair (remember that he mentions, in passing, wigs being made of real hair).

Bathing

In Japan, it's not uncommon for several people to bathe together when there's a suitably large tub available. Although mixed baths (*kon'yoku*) do exist, most public bathing in Japan is separated by gender. Hence, it wouldn't actually be that unusual for Shinichi and Hikaru to bathe together—it's just that at this point, Shinichi is under some misconceptions about who Hikaru is.

A Real and Fulfilling Life with a Woman

Shinichi uses the term *riajuu*, a bit of 2-chan slang derived from "someone with a fulfilling (*juujitsu shita*) real (*riaru*) life." Normally it refers, with a mixture of derision and envy, to people who are in a happy, committed relationship.

Do You Want Me to Explode?!

A Twitter expression with its roots in 2-chan, meaning basically, "Do you want me to get angry?" We might use the expression "pull an Incredible Hulk."

Chapter Two

A Wasted Opportunity

Shinichi says that even with (what he assumes is) a beautiful woman right there next to him, he doesn't have the nerve to simply say, "Well, it would be a shame to waste an opportunity when it comes knocking, ho ho ho!" This line, somewhat verbose in translation, refers in the original to the saying "*suezen kuwanu wa otoko no haji da*," literally, "It's to a man's shame not to eat a meal set out for him." Here, *suezen* has the figurative meaning of a woman's advances—that is, when a girl is practically throwing herself at a guy, he should be embarrassed not to act.

I Mustn't Stand Up

Alludes to Shinji's famous mantra "I mustn't run away" from *Evangelion*.

Calm Down and Count Your Prime Numbers

Another catchphrase from *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*.

Dead Twin

A reference to a scene in Adachi Mitsuru's *Touch!*, in which the protagonist goes to a hospital morgue to view the corpse of his older brother after the latter's death.

The Yaranaika Guy

Known in Japanese as "Abe-san," Abe Takakazu is a character who has come to represent a certain kind of gay person on Nico-Nico; he's especially famous for claiming, "I don't mind straight boys" (*nonke demo kuu*).

Harmful to Youth

Yuugai zusho ("harmful books") is what the Japanese call books that are considered to portray sex or violence in a way detrimental to young readers. The determination of what books (or games, etc.) fall into this category can be made on either the national or local level.

My Maidenhead before My Virginity

Shinichi says he doesn't want to lose his □□ (*shojo*) before his □□ (*doutei*). *Shojo* means a female virgin, while *doutei* is a male virgin, and what he seems to mean is that he doesn't want to lose his virginity to a guy instead of or before a girl.

Resumes

The Japanese resume (*rirekisho*) usually follows a very specific format, and includes details that would not be found on a resume in, for example, the United States—including gender. This is why Shinichi surmises Matoba would have known Hikaru's gender on account of having seen his resume. (Incidentally, *rirekisho* also include a space where the applicant is expected to paste a passport-sized portrait photo.)

Card Costs

Hikaru suggests that "a pack of ten cards costs a hundred yen." At current exchange rates and making no adjustment for inflation, that would be a little less than one US dollar.

Comiket

A semi-annual "comics market" held in Tokyo. Chiefly features doujinshi or fan-made works, some original and some based on existing properties.

Takai-sensei & Misagi-sensei

These are probably references to Takarai Rihito (author of, among other things, the manga *Ten Count*) and Misasagi Fuhri, the artist for a game called *Kichiku Megane*.

Gakuen Rakuen

A reference to *Gakuen Heaven*, an old BL game. (*Gakuen* means "academy"; *rakuen* is the Japanese word for heaven or paradise, although it's represented with the katakana loanwoard *Hevun* in the title of the original game.) *Gakuen Heaven* and *Kichiku Megane* were both released by a company called Spray. Although the *Gakuen Heaven* franchise originated

with a PC game, it expanded to include a variety of media, so the "fan disc" mentioned in the text could be any of several things.

Put Ice on a Century-Old Love Affair

This isn't a reference as such, but essentially proverbial; the phrase refers to any information (such as about a character trait or perhaps a bit of personal history) which, if known, could cause someone's feelings for a person to change immediately. Here, Shinichi means that Minori's unabashed adoration for BL material could cause someone to reconsider how they felt about her.

The Drawl

In Japanese, Shinichi suddenly begins speaking in Kansai (Osaka-area) dialect. This accent is generally considered to be humorous in Japanese (at least by people who don't speak it), hence Shinichi's reasoning.

It's Always My Turn

Zutto ore no taan!, a *Yu-Gi-Oh!* reference.

Playing for Keeps

In its earliest forms, the seminal trading-card game *Magic: The Gathering* not only had "ante" (a randomly drawn card each player wagered at the beginning of the game), but made this feature a part of the gameplay, with some cards that instructed players to add another card to the ante or do other things with it. Ante eventually fell out of favor and was dropped from the rules many years ago. We mention this only for interest, and not to suggest that this scene is necessarily an *M:TG* reference; informal and to a lesser extent formal use of ante has surrounded plenty of similar games.

The Opium Wars

The two conflicts collectively known as the Opium Wars took place from 1839–1842 and from 1856–1860. Shinichi describes their motivation and methods pretty accurately; setting aside the effects of the actual drugs on Chinese society, the wars weakened the already ailing Qing Empire and allowed the British Empire to claim swaths of Chinese territory. The wars were an early feature of what China would later term its "century of

humiliation," during which the once-great empire was increasingly subject to territorial division and punitive treaties at the hands of the major European powers as well as Japan.

Chapter Three

An Old Saying

The proverb goes, "*Bijin wa mikka tateba akiru*" (one tires of a beautiful woman after three days). It sometimes continues, "*busu wa mikka tateba nareru*" ([and] one gets used to an ugly woman after three days). The implication seems to be that looks aren't as important as one might think in choosing a partner.

Yugi WAR

The first part of this name probably plays on *Yu-Gi-Oh!*. The second part may be a reference to *Gundam War*, a collectible card game first released in Japan in 1999 and which continues to this day. Alternatively, "war" may simply be a broad obfuscation of the sound "Oh."

Myuul-tan

-*Tan* is a particularly diminutive honorific.

Cave of the Sun Goddess

Called Ama-no-Iwato ("the stone cave of heaven") in Japanese, this comes from a myth in which the sun goddess Amaterasu retreats to said cave after her brother, the storm god Susano-o, treats her outrageously. Amaterasu stays in the cave, depriving the world of light. The other gods decide that in order to lure the sun goddess out, they'll hold a raucous party just outside the entrance to the cave. (The party famously features one of the other goddesses doing a striptease.) Amaterasu, curious about what's going on, peeks out, whereupon the gods pull her back into the world and seal the entrance to the cave with a stone. A more aggressive localization might translate this phrase as "fortress of solitude."

Kamishibai Games

Kamishibai ("paper plays") as a traditional form of theater in Japan using paper dolls. In video games, it refers to a genre similar to visual novels, but usually without any choices at all to be made by the player.

Probatio Diabolica

Latin for "the devil's proof," this is a fancy way of saying that you can't prove a negative. To prove that something is possible, only one positive or affirmative example must be found; by contrast, to prove that something is impossible, in principle, every possible case would have to be tested and the result found to be negative. For example, I might claim that you can't fly by jumping off a cliff, but since there are an infinite number of conceivable cases of people jumping off cliffs, and any one of them might—just might—result in someone flying instead of plummeting to their doom, I can't technically prove my claim. In this scene, Hikaru asks Shinichi to prove that ero games and the like are *not* related to otaku committing crimes, which Minori calls out as impossible to do.

Chapter Four

Schadenfreude

The Japanese translated using this word (itself German for "joy at harm") is *meshiuma*. It's short for the expression *tanin no fukou de kyou mo **meshi** ga **uma**i*, or "Other people's unhappiness makes my food delicious today as well." Or if you will, "The sorrow of others is the best spice." Yikes!

Boyish Girls

In Japanese, *bokukko*, literally referring to girls who use the first-person pronoun *boku* to refer to themselves. *Boku* is more typically associated with young men, so girls who use it are sometimes considered to sound tomboyish or less feminine.

Charlie Chaplin Moustache

A *chobi-hige*, sometimes called a toothbrush mustache. The "glasses" Shinichi mentions are probably those the Major wears. The Major doesn't have a mustache, but there's someone close to that character who did have this sort of facial hair: Adolf Hitler.

Yes Lolita! No Touch!

This was a catchphrase used in the manga magazine *Comic LO*. It was basically intended to exonerate lolicon and its readers by establishing that "a gentleman" (note Shinichi's use of this word in his speech) might fantasize about having encounters with children, but would and should never act those fantasies out.

The Major and Gi*n

Shinichi's speech in the courtyard directly parodies two well-known anime speeches. The first (beginning with, "Friends, I love pretty girls") is the "I love war" speech from *Hellsing Ultimate*, delivered by a character called "the Major." Our English translation for the speech leans on but doesn't slavishly follow the English dub of the original. The second major segment of Shinichi's oration (beginning at "Let me be clear") is based on a

speech given by Gihren Zabi in *Mobile Suit Gundam* (sometimes called the A Baoa Qu Defense Speech). Though an English dub of this scene exists, it is considerably freer than the English script of the Major's speech, and thus didn't lend itself as well to being adapted for this parody. For that reason, the English translation of the second part of Shinichi's courtyard speech more reflects the Japanese original than the English dub of the scene being parodied.

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Outbreak Company: Volume 6
by Ichiro Sakaki

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